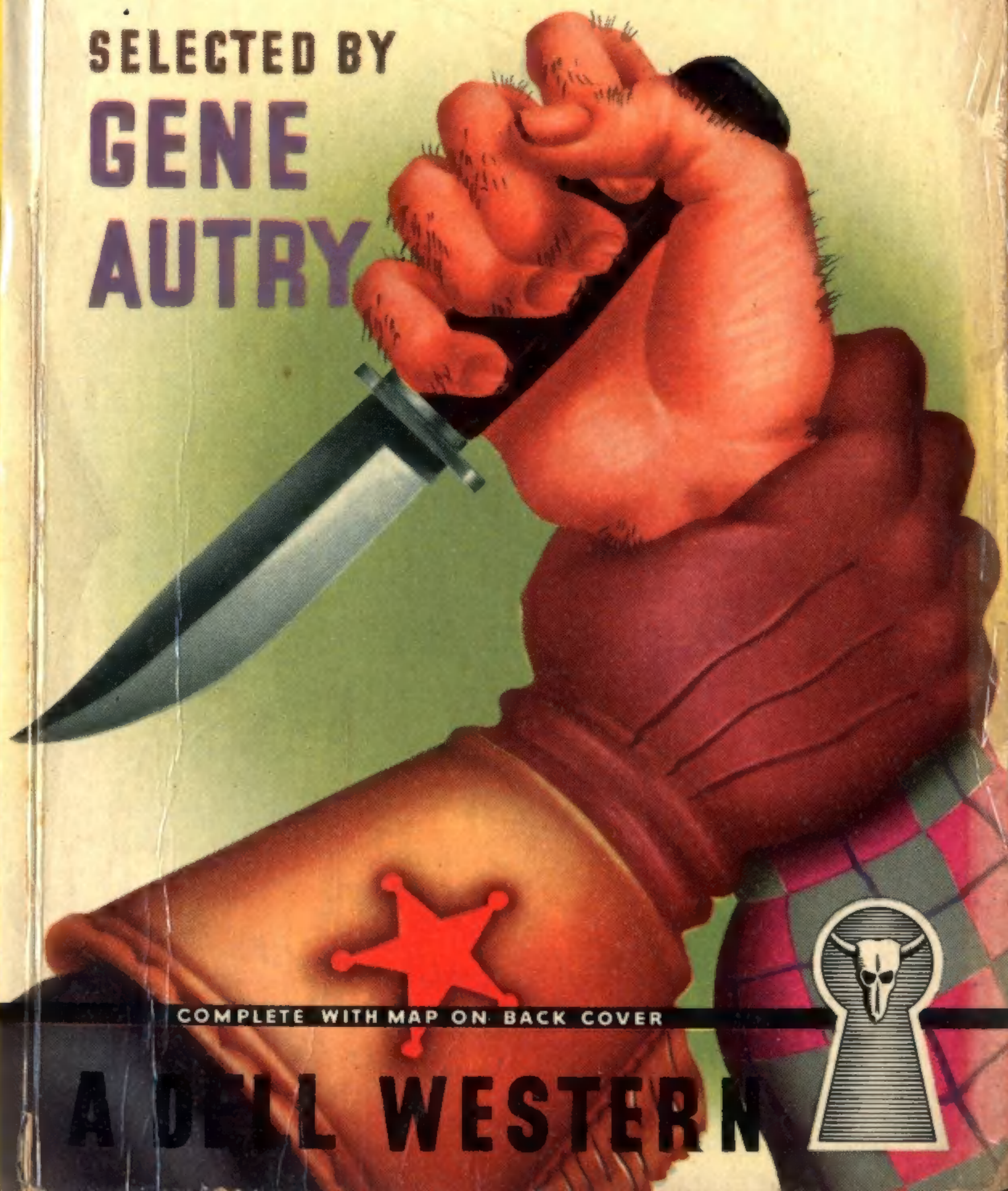


A DELL BOOK
DELL
153

WESTERN STORIES

SELECTED BY
**GENE
AUTRY**



COMPLETE WITH MAP ON BACK COVER

A DELL WESTERN



153

WESTERN STORIES • GENE AUTRY

A DELL BOOK
DELL
A DELL BOOK

SADDLES----SAGEBRUSH----SIX-GUNS

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WESTERN STORIES

Selected by

GENE AUTRY

DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY

George T. Delacorte, Jr., President

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WESTERN STORIES

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I Like Westerns

WHEN the publishers of this book asked me to act as editor for a collection of Western stories, I didn't hesitate a minute. I'm no literary critic, but I've read lots of Western yarns and I know what I like. So I jumped at the chance to go back and check on some of my old favorites, and to read up on the new ones. The result is this group of what I consider top-notch Western shorts, brought together from many sources for your reading pleasure.

These yarns are featured mainly by *action*—and that's what I think the average Western story fan wants his favorite reading to have. What's more, I think that is just what makes the best kind of Western—thrilling action, with man pitted against man in the age-old fight of good against evil. However, these stories do have *something* besides pure action. They are well written and cleanly plotted. You get character, like in "With Bated Breath" and in "Gold-Mounted Guns." There is real suspense—plenty of it in "The Watchdog of Lonesome Creek," "Soapsuds," and "Baldy at the Brink."

But action is the main thing, and it comes in the form of gunfight thrills in "The Marshal of Broken Lance," rodeo stuff in "First Blood," and sharpshooting in "Peep-Sight Shoots High." You'll gun it out with Hopalong and his pals, solve the crime with Shelley Raines, and talk with the old-timer who knew Billy the Kid. Ernest Haycox serves up the story of a pioneer's desperate battle against time, the elements, and raiding redskins; and Bill Mowery tells how a Mountie saves a bunch of squatters.

I'm going to stop right here, folks. Like I said, I'm no literary critic. These yarns are in this book for the simple reason that they are some of my favorites—they're here for you to read—and I know you're going to like them too.

So pitch right in, folks. Good reading and—Adios!

GENE AUTRY



The Marshal of Broken Lance

By Frank Gruber

THE MEN WHO NAME TOWNS don't always reveal their reasons for giving certain names to places. No one cared how Broken Lance got its name. It hadn't been an important place, anyway. Not until certain Texas cattlemen got the idea of driving their herds up to the railroad in Kansas.

In 1865 Broken Lance consisted of a combination post office and general store and a half dozen houses. In 1874 Broken Lance had a railroad depot and a winter population of 400 and a summer population of 3,000. Humans. On the plains surrounding the town were a quarter million Texas steers, waiting to be loaded on trains.

Twenty-six hundred Texas men had a year's wages to spend in Broken Lance; they had a thirst engendered by a year's herding of unruly Longhorns up the Chisholm Trail. They had things to get out of their systems. It was nine years since Lee had surrendered at Appomatox. Texas had never surrendered. And so, although the *Broken Lance Plainsman*, imbued with civic pride, printed every week in bold type: *Peace Reigns in Broken Lance*, it reported underneath, in the Local News column, the casualties of the week: so many gunfights, so many broken heads, so many arrests.

The Texas men took it all as a huge joke. They tried their very best to increase the totals of the first two classifications. And John Tompkins added constantly to the total of the "arrest" column. Tompkins was a good marshal, the best that Broken Lance had ever had—and it had had four from May 1 to July 5, when Tompkins had accepted the post.

Dick Sellers had accounted for two of those four. It was his ambition—for Tompkins was a man famous in his own right—to list his name above those of the other two mar-

shals on the side of his chuck wagon. It would earn for Sellers undying glory upon his return to Texas.

John Tompkins was coming out of Sue Whitfield's millinery shop when he heard the rattle of gunfire. He said something under his breath and ran, holding down his Frontier Model Colts, toward the Broken Lance Saloon and Gambling Parlor.

When he pushed through the batwing doors, Caddo Colin was lying on the floor before the bar, dead, and Dick Sellers was stepping up to order a drink. The customers were crawling out from under the tables where they had gone to duck the flying lead.

Tompkins let his hands hang loosely at his sides and said to Sellers, "You're under arrest."

Sellers turned to John Tompkins and smirked. "Self-defense, Marshal. He drew first." He flipped his head in the general direction of the customers, to indicate they were witnesses that what he said was true.

Tompkins did not doubt Dick Sellers's word. The Texas man always made the other man draw first. And he never shot it out unless there were plenty of witnesses.

"All right, he drew first," Tompkins said. "Just the same, you're under arrest."

Sellers didn't like that. If he went to jail it would mean remaining locked up all night and in the morning Judge Sugrue would fine him \$100. It was always a hundred. Sellers said, "Now wait, Tompkins. I know you don't like me, but twenty men here heard Colin insult me. They saw him draw on me. Why—he fired five times before I let him have it."

"I believe you," conceded Tompkins. "Colin was fast—and scared. So scared he blazed away all his bullets without taking aim. You knew he'd do that and you took your time. When his gun was empty you shot him down."

"Some day, Tompkins," said Dick Sellers, "*you're* going to draw first on me."

"When I do, Dick Sellers," Tompkins replied evenly, "you'll die. And now, drop your guns—or draw them!"

Dick Sellers thought that over for a moment. Tomp-

kins could see that he was half inclined to make his play now. But the setup wasn't just right. Sellers slowly unbuckled his gun belt and let it fall about his feet.

Tompkins scooped it up with his left hand. With his head he gestured toward the door. As he followed the Texas man outside, he heard men hooting behind him.

Fully 300 Texas men lined the street when Tompkins marched behind Dick Sellers to the calaboose. And every one of those men was hostile to Tompkins. Not to him, personally, but as a representative of the Northern law they hated.

Back in their own state, with the railroad still 900 miles away, a steer had a hide and tallow value of \$3. Up here in Kansas it brought \$20. The Texas men appreciated the difference. Yet at the same time, it was hated Northern money.

When Tompkins passed the Broken Lance Bank he saw Doug Sutherland standing in the doorway. Sutherland's Prince Albert coat was pushed back and revealed the gun at his thigh. Tompkins knew why Sutherland was standing there, on the stoop a foot from the ground, where he could look over the heads of the Texas men on the sidewalk.

Tompkins nodded to Sutherland as he went by. Neither spoke. Sutherland knew that Tompkins knew why he was standing there. He knew, too, that as long as he was giving visible support to Tompkins, no sober Texas man would make a play against the city marshal.

Link Naylor opened the bullpen when Tompkins brought Sellers into the calaboose. He shook his head behind Tompkins's back, but otherwise gave no indication of his views concerning the arrest of Dick Sellers. Perhaps the Texas men would decide to get Sellers out of the jail. In that case Link would be standing in the door with a shotgun. He got \$75 a month as the custodian of the jail. If he had to give his life for that \$75, well, that was part of the job.

Tompkins arrested them. Link Naylor kept them in the calaboose until Tompkins let them out. No matter what.

When Tompkins came back, Doug Sutherland had moved to the Prairie State Saloon next door to his bank. It was getting late. From ten to four every day Doug Sutherland ran the only legitimate bank in Broken Lance. It was the profession he had learned in the East. In Broken Lance it wasn't the best paying one; so Sutherland ran, from four in the afternoon until there were no more players, the faro bank in the Prairie State Saloon.

The profits of that kept his bank next door going. In Broken Lance there was more prestige in running a faro bank than an ordinary one. In 1874. In ten years perhaps things would change.

"Hello, John," said Sutherland.

Tompkins stopped and drew a long, thin cigar from his shirt pocket. He bit off the end and stuck the cigar into his mouth. He flicked a match into flame with his thumbnail and applied it to the cigar. "How's banking, Doug?" he asked.

Sutherland knew Tompkins didn't care for an answer to that question. He said, "It's coming, John."

Tompkins shrugged. "It had to come. Sellers should have been gone two weeks now. He's been waiting."

Sutherland looked across the street to Sue Whitfield's millinery shop. "Sue was out when you went past a minute ago."

Tompkins nodded. "I saw her." He talked with Sutherland a moment or two about trivial matters, then crossed the street. The Texas men had gone into the saloons, to resume their drinking. Tompkins entered Sue Whitfield's little shop and found her busy with a customer—one of Kate Miller's girls from the Broken Lance Saloon. She signaled for him to wait and continued with her customer.

"Here's the very latest, Jinny," she said to the shopper. "I copied the design out of Godey's Book. It's supposed to be all the rage in Boston."

The painted girl, Jinny, scrutinized herself in the mirror. She twisted her head to one side to get a profile view, dropped her eyes, and attempted to look demure. Finally she said, "How much is it, Sue?"

Sue hesitated a moment. Then, "Twenty dollars, Jinny. The materials are expensive."

"Did I complain about the price, Sue?" asked Jinny. "I'll take the hat. On one condition. That you don't sell one like it to any of the other girls."

"Oh, I won't, Jinny," declared Sue Whitfield. "I never make more than one hat of a style. You know that."

"Fine." Jinny counted out the money. "Throw my other hat away."

She got up, swaggered in a manner that was to be made famous by a movie actress sixty years later. "Hello, Marshal," she said to John Tompkins. "I hear you had a little trouble with one of the boys."

"No trouble," said Tompkins.

The woman went out to display her new hat to Broken Lance. Tompkins looked after her. Then he returned to Sue Whitfield. "Do you ever get any other customers, Sue?" he asked.

"Not often," she replied. "Except when some Texas man happens to think before his money is all gone that he wants to take a present back to Texas!"

"And yet you opened this shop with that idea?"

"It didn't quite work out that way," said Sue. "I read in the papers that the trail cities offered splendid opportunities to almost any type of business. I wasn't doing very well in Springfield, anyway, so—I sold out and came here. I'm making expenses, John. But—you, what about you? I saw what happened a little while ago."

"I had to arrest him," said Tompkins. "He'll pay his fine and be turned loose."

"And then he'll be more determined than ever to kill you, John—why don't you give it up?"

He looked steadily at her. "Sue," he said, "I don't want to be a marshal. But someone's got to be—and I'm the best man for the job." He wasn't boasting. He was merely stating a fact. Sue knew it was true.

"I know," she said, "you're the only man who can keep the Texas men in line. But what about Wichita, Abilene, and Dodge—and the other cattle towns? They are getting

along."

"There's a man for each. Wyatt Earp in Dodge, Hickok in Abilene. It's our job, Sue. Like yours is—well, to sell hats. Don't you see, Sue? It's not you—or me. It's the country. We didn't make it this way, but as it's so, we've got jobs to fill. I'm a peaceful man by nature. That I happen to have a certain—knack—with guns and men, well, that's just so.

"Broken Lance didn't want to be trail's end. It was here and the trail came into being and the railroad just happened to pass here. That's the way it is with you and me. Look at Doug Sutherland. Come from a fine family, went into banking. Now he runs a faro bank to keep his other bank going. In ten years, perhaps, the faro bank'll be forgotten. Then Doug'll be the big banker of Broken Lance, maybe the county. You can't tell where he'll go."

It was a long speech for John Tompkins. Sue knew it and she understood, partly. But it didn't make things easier. She said, "But what about you and me, John?"

He worried the end of his full, sweeping mustache with his teeth. "I don't know, Sue," he said in a low tone. "Perhaps—perhaps we should try to make the most of what is and of what we are."

What he said touched the spark in her that is in all women. She exclaimed, "No, John, it wouldn't work. Do you think I could sit quietly at home, waiting—and dreading what the day will bring? Not knowing whether you'll come home walking—or being carried. Do you think I could stand that hour after hour, day after day? Why, John—even now, every time I hear a voice raised outside, every time I see a man running or hear a gun fired, I—oh, John, it's hard enough now!"

He wanted to take her into his arms. He wanted to soothe her and tell her he'd quit and take her east—to Illinois. He wanted to—and he couldn't. Because he was John Tompkins and this was Broken Lance.

He moved heavily to the door. With his hand on it, he said, "You'll be at the church supper, Sue?"

She nodded hopelessly, and he went out.

The Texas men were coming into town. In a couple of hours the saloons would be jammed. The bartenders would be augmented by the evening staffs, the honkytonks would be running at full blast and the games, Doug Sutherland's faro bank among them, would get their play.

Tompkins stopped in at the Trail City Restaurant and had his supper. Afterward he picked up Big Ben Cassidy, his deputy, and they worked along Railroad Street, the main thoroughfare, four blocks long with 16 saloons on one side of the street and 14 on the other, and with every other saloon having a dance hall in connection.

They usually worked together after dark. It was safer. While the rule of the day was to let your guns stay in your holsters until you'd given the order to draw, that didn't always apply to Texas men. Sometimes, under the influence of liquor, a Texas man shot first and gave the ultimatum afterward.

They were hostile tonight. Eight or ten arrests a day was not out of proportion, but Dick Sellers belonged to one of the big Texas outfits. They had brought 50,000 head to railhead and received in exchange a half million dollars, much of which they were spending in Broken Lance. That gave the Sellers outfit special license; so the Texas men figured.

Besides, all of them knew it was only a matter of days now until Sellers and Tompkins would be squaring off and deciding the issue. Tompkins had been marshal of Broken Lance for more than ten weeks, when two weeks was the average life of a marshal.

When they came out of the Boston Saloon, Ben Cassidy said, "Did Sheriff Pendexter tell you about the reward that's up for Long Jake Simon?"

Tompkins nodded. "Long Jake's headed for The Nations."

"That's what Pendexter said. The U.S. marshal was in his office today. Asked if he knew anyone could go down to The Nations country and get Long Jake."

Tompkins understood. "No," he said, "I'm not going. I'm playing out the string here. You could get Long Jake,

Ben; you know The Nations better than I do."

Ben Cassidy shrugged. "All right, John. Only—Pendexter told me to mention it to you."

"Because of Dick Sellers? Did he think I'd run away from Sellers?"

"Now, John," Cassidy said soothingly, "you know it wouldn't be Sellers. It'd be the whole Texas outfit. They'd run Broken Lance up a tree and keep it there the rest of the summer. You're not fighting just Dick Sellers."

In front of the Prairie Saloon Doug Sutherland was standing, smoking a cigar. He was looking across the street at Sue Whitfield's millinery store. Tompkins stopped and Cassidy moved on a little way.

"Cumings is running the game," Sutherland explained elaborately. "I figure I'll take things easy tonight."

But Tompkins knew. He was the most undemonstrative man in all Broken Lance, yet he couldn't resist gripping the banker's muscular arm. "It's hell, Sutherland," he said.

Sutherland made a wry face. "All around, isn't it?"

Tompkins nodded. He was silent an awkward moment, then he said, "Somehow, Doug, I've a feeling it won't be long. Things are going to crack, one way or the other. For you too."

"I had a letter from my brother just today, John," said Sutherland. "His bank's made quite a recovery from last year. He—he wants me to come back."

"But you're not going?"

Sutherland drew long on his cigar. He said, "No."

Tompkins followed after Ben Cassidy. They worked along Railroad Street, stopped in at every saloon and dance hall, stood around a few minutes, and walked out deliberately. That something was in the air, Tompkins knew. He felt it. Yet it wasn't in the way the Texas men looked at him, nor in the way they deliberately turned their backs on him.

In the Panhandle Bar a drunken puncher pushed over a faro table and the dealer, bluffed by the sight of fifty Texas men, let him get away with it. Emboldened, the puncher drew his Frontier Model and began shooting at

lights.

Ben Cassidy and John Tompkins, attracted by the shooting, dashed into the Panhandle. The Texas man tried drunkenly to take aim at Cassidy, but Tompkins slipped to one side and laid the barrel of his Peacemaker along the side of the puncher's head. Cassidy dragged the buffaloed Texas man off to jail, while Tompkins lingered in the Panhandle, half expecting the blowoff to come. But while the Texas men swore and talked boisterously, they made no overt moves toward John Tompkins.

Around eight o'clock Tompkins left Cassidy at the jail and went across the railroad tracks that constituted a deadline for the Texas men. Here the real citizens of Broken Lance held sway, the merchants and their families, the legitimate businessmen.

There were perhaps a hundred of them, almost half the crowd women and children, in the frame building that was used as a church.

It was an affable, cheerful crowd. John Tompkins was greeted in friendly fashion by everyone. He moved through them, passing a pleasant word here and there. He searched for a certain face, but he couldn't find it. Then Mayor Bunce and Councilman Henderson pulled him to one side.

"John," they said, "the word's gone around to get you."

"I know that," he said. "Sellers has been talking it up for two-three weeks, now."

The Mayor looked uncomfortable. "You think it wise—to bring it to a showdown?"

"What else can I do?"

"Well, we talked about it some. Sellers is overdue. His men have spent their money. And we—we thought if you went away for a couple of weeks that he'd go home."

"And suppose he did? Would that solve your problem? Every Texas man would know the marshal of Broken Lance had run out on Sellers. If I came back—or you got another marshal—the same thing would start. Every Texas man is a potential Dick Sellers. You'd never have any law and order in Broken Lance."

"I guess you're right, John," said the mayor. "It was you we were thinking of. You know—"

"I'll be killed? No, I don't know that. Somehow I don't feel it's my time yet. I'm a better man than any Texas man and I think they know it. You had four marshals in the eight weeks preceding me, Mr. Bunce. I've been on the job ten. But it's up to you—you're the boss. You hired me. If you want to fire me—"

"No, no, John," said Mayor Bunce hurriedly. "That's the last thing we want. You *have* made Broken Lance livable. Which, I guess, is all we can expect these days. Perhaps some day—"

"Yes, in five or six years the railroad will be going down into Texas. The Chisholm Trail will grow grass again. And Broken Lance will become an ordinary town, grow a natural growth. I—" John Tompkins's eyes were on the door. "Excuse me, someone I want to see."

Sue Whitfield had come in on the arm of Doug Sutherland. Tompkins moved toward them casually.

It was Sue who greeted him first. "John, I want to talk to you."

"Of course."

Doug Sutherland showed his strong white teeth in a smile, nodded, and began talking to the wife of the Reverend Williamson.

Tompkins moved to one side with Sue. "John," she said, "I want you to leave Broken Lance tonight. Ride over to Baker. I want you to do it—for me!"

He looked steadily into her wide, blue eyes. "What is it, Sue? You've heard something?"

Her eyes dropped from his. "Yes. One of the girls from the Broken Lance Dance Hall. They—they're planning to break out Sellers from the jail. It's a plot—to get you, John!"

"You know of course I can't go?"

"I know you *must* go, John." Her voice was low and determined. "I heard about it two hours ago and I've been thinking about it ever since. I've made up my mind, John. I can't stand it. You've got to ride out of Broken Lance in

the next half hour or it's all over. Don't you see," her fine eyes turned up and looked into his, "it hurts too much, the—the uncertainty. I've got to put it out of me. Or I can't go on."

He was silent. And then she knew she had lost, despite her ultimatum. She said dully, "You won't go. You'll stay—and die."

He looked at her soberly. "You know."

"And me—you know I won't want to live then?" Her low voice was desperate.

He looked at tall, handsome Doug Sutherland. Then he bowed to Sue and moved off. He left the church.

Across the tracks it seemed to him the noises of the 30 saloons were slightly subdued. If what Sue had told him was true—and it was—it meant that they all knew, that they were taking their drinking easier tonight, for what was ahead.

At the calaboose he found Ben Cassidy. "They're going to spring Dick Sellers," he told his deputy.

Cassidy stepped to the gunrack. He took down an English shotgun, that was his own property. He broke the breech and saw that there were two shells in the chambers. Each contained nine chunks of lead. It was a deadly weapon.

"I don't know, Ben," Tompkins said. "I've got to fight sooner or later, but is it the right thing to let them come here with their fight? It means you and Link and others."

"It's our jobs," said Ben.

"Mine, too. We can't let a mob break a prisoner out of jail. But you and I know that Judge Sugrue'll merely fine Sellers a hundred dollars and turn him loose in the morning. My fight with Sellers, well, that's mine alone. It shouldn't involve others. Yes, that's the right thing. Link, run up to the Cattleman's Hotel and fetch the judge. Tell him he's got to come down here and hold a bit of court. Tell him why."

The custodian of the jail hesitated. Then he shrugged and put down the shotgun he had picked up. He disappeared out of the door.

"I don't think you're doing right, John," said Ben Cassidy. "The Texas men will figure you lost your nerve. They been pretty tame, compar'tively, but once they figure they got you—us—on the run, it'll be hell in Broken Lance."

"Perhaps, Ben," said Tompkins. "But somehow, I know it's the right way. And just to make sure—" He picked up the big key from the hook where Link Naylor kept it and stepped to the door of the bullpen where the prisoners were quartered. He unlocked the door, threw it open, and said, "Come out, Sellers."

Dick Sellers came to the door, his eyes blinking from the light in the office. "What's up?"

"Judge Sugrue's coming over in a minute. He's going to sentence you here."

"What?" Dick Sellers scowled. "He can't do that. It—it ain't court here. I guess I know my rights."

"You haven't any, Sellers. You're a prisoner. If the judge wants to fine you here that's his business."

"I won't pay any fine," protested Sellers. "You can't make me."

"Ah, then you know?"

Sellers flushed. "I don't know anything. I just made up my mind I've shelled out enough of my money in this stinkin', two-bit town."

Tompkins chewed at his mustache. After a moment he sighed lightly. "In that case, Sellers, as the arresting officer, I withdraw my charge against you."

Sellers's jaw dropped. "I don't get you."

"You're free. You can go."

Slowly a look of triumph spread over Dick Sellers's cruel face. He swaggered into the room. "Where's my guns?"

"Are you leaving town? If so, I'll give them to you."

"No, I'm not leaving—yet!"

"Then I'm keeping your guns."

Dick Sellers snorted. He shrugged and walked heavily out of the calaboose.

John Tompkins stood in the doorway and watched the Texas man clump up the wooden sidewalk. He saw him

turn into the Broken Lance Saloon and then he said to Ben Cassidy:

"Stay here and tell Link and the judge I turned him loose."

"You're going after him, John?"

"I've got to finish it."

"Then I'm going with you."

"No!" Tompkins spoke sharply. "It's my fight. You stay here."

Tompkins's hands dropped to the Frontier Model Colts with the eight-inch barrels. He lifted up each one to make sure it wasn't caught in its holster, then let it slide down gently.

He nodded to Cassidy and walked up the street.

The noise coming from the Broken Lance Saloon rivaled that of a sizable Indian war party. The Texas men were celebrating the moral victory over John Tompkins, as related by Dick Sellers. They were celebrating it with liquor and wild talk. In ten or fifteen minutes they'd reach the stage where they would turn out *en masse* and shoot up the town—and kill or maim a half dozen innocent persons, besides treeing Broken Lance. And once treed, Broken Lance would remain up for the rest of the summer until the seasonly exodus of the Texas men to the South, that had spawned them.

Tompkins reached for the swinging doors. His hand was ahead of a lean, muscular one that reached from the other side. In his abstraction he had not seen Doug Sutherland come up from the other direction. And now it was too late. The door was open and he was seen.

"Keep out of it, Doug," Tompkins said tightly and stepped into the Broken Lance Saloon.

By sections, the carousing Texas men quieted. Those near the door, first, then the others as they became aware of the stillness. By the time Tompkins had progressed half down the lane that was made for him, the entire saloon was quiet.

Dick Sellers had borrowed guns. They were at his thighs. He stood with his feet wide apart, facing John

Tompkins, a whisky glass in his right hand, his left hooked in the waistband of his levis, above the crossed gun belts.

Behind Sellers and all around were his friends, his own employees. And plenty of Texas men who sided with other Texas men, no matter what the right or the wrong of the fight, merely because they hated all Northerners and the Civil War was only nine years old. And because they were wild men by instinct and environment.

"Hello, Marshal," Dick Sellers said harshly. "Hear yo're leavin' town? Quittin' yore job?"

"The rumor's exaggerated, Sellers," Tompkins replied. "It's you that's leaving." He made a small gesture with his right hand. "We don't have to go through all this. You want to fight me, Sellers. All right, I'm ready."

In the rear of the saloon there was sudden movement. Gamblers were stepping out of range, turning over the tables for shelter. But around Sellers and Tompkins no one moved. Tompkins had brought the play up to Dick Sellers and it was the Texas man's move.

Dick Sellers's face and neck were turning red. For so long he had taunted other men into fighting, bringing the play to him and thereby providing him with his self-defense plea. But he knew he couldn't anger John Tompkins sufficiently to make him draw first and he knew that if he didn't fight now that it was brought to him, he'd lose the backing of his followers.

Yet he had no desire to be in the wrong in a fight. If he drew first on John Tompkins and killed him, the U.S. marshal would get him. Either that or Sellers would have to take to the outlaw trails. And he had no zest for that.

"You're wastin' yore time, Tompkins," he said coolly. "I won't draw against you. I'll fight my own way, or—"

John Tompkins slapped Dick Sellers's face. Texas men gasped and breathed hoarsely.

But Dick Sellers, although his face was livid where Tompkins had struck him, would not draw. His hand holding the glass of whisky was white at the knuckles. Tompkins saw it and wondered idly if the Texas man would crush the glass in his hands.

"Put that on your chuck wagon, Sellers," he said; "the men along the trail will like it."

And still Sellers would not fight. John Tompkins knew it and he went cold inside. The whole thing would start all over again. Sellers would smart under the insult and humiliation. Tomorrow he'd probably taunt Ben Cassidy into a fight, make him draw first, and then kill him. And the day after—

Then Doug Sutherland's lean hand reached past John Tompkins and shoved upward on the hand holding the glass of whisky. The contents sloshed into Dick Sellers's face.

"Maybe you'll fight *me* then, Sellers!" said Doug Sutherland.

The whisky had not got into Sellers's eyes. It had, however, splashed over his throat and chin and mouth. It accomplished what John Tompkins's slap in the face had not done.

Dick Sellers screamed in fury and went for his guns.

John Tompkins waited; he waited until the guns of Dick Sellers had cleared leather. The distance was too short to count on Sellers missing in his rage, even as Sellers usually counted on frightened gun-reachers to miss him.

Yet Tompkins had to make it clear to all that he had given Sellers more than an even break. So he waited until Dick Sellers's guns had cleared leather before he went for his own.

And Sellers was fast on the draw, terribly fast.

His right gun belched fire and thundered. But the slug did not shock Tompkins. Sellers had sent it into Sutherland instead, and in the infinitesimal fraction of a second he had to think, over that horrible fact, Tompkins knew that he had made a great mistake. A mistake he would never forget or forgive. This was one time he should have violated his code of always waiting for the other man to draw first; it would have meant saving the life of Sutherland, his friend. Yet the mistake could not be recalled. All he could do, to atone for it, was to kill Dick Sellers.

He did. His first slug hit the Texas man squarely in the

forehead. And then he stepped swiftly to the bar, put his back against it and menaced the Texas men with his two guns. Sellers fell in front of him, his body colliding with falling Doug Sutherland's.

Crash!

The ceiling of the saloon quivered with the impact of a shotgun blast.

Ben Cassidy was in the doorway. He had fired into the ceiling to attract the attention of the men in the saloon—away from John Tompkins. Beside him, similarly armed with a shotgun, was Link Naylor. And behind them, Mayor Bunce and a crowded doorful of citizens of Broken Lance.

"Up with 'em!" roared Big Ben Cassidy. "Every mother's son of you. Or we start slaughterin'!"

Dick Sellers was dead. The Texas men knew that. He had been their leader. Individually and collectively they might fight on provocation—but not the provocation of double-barreled shotguns in the hands of a dozen men at close range. And the lethal menace of John Tompkins's twin Colts flanking them.

There was a light in Sue Whitfield's millinery shop. Sue was sitting in a chair, her hands folded in her lap and her face white and strained.

John Tompkins looked at her and he said, "He loved you, Sue."

"I know," she said. "That's why—he did it. He was your best friend and he knew I loved *you*."

"He knew that Sellers would kill him. He deliberately drew his bullet away from me. And he had *it*, Sue; Doug Sutherland would have been a big man, perhaps one of the biggest in this state."

"Yes, John," Sue said. "I know now what he knew. That it's harder sometimes to live than to die."

"You mean—?"

"That you'll go on. That there'll be other Dick Sellerses and that you'll be fighting them, always. And I'll always be waiting for you. Loving and waiting and dreading every

hour. And some day it'll be *you*."

He moved toward her. "Perhaps," he said clumsily, "in a few years, I won't be necessary."

"Perhaps," she smiled wanly, thinking of Doug Sutherland. "Perhaps." But she did not believe it.

Gold-Mounted Guns

By F. R. Buckley

EVENING HAD FALLEN on Longhorn City, and already, to the south, an eager star was twinkling in the velvet sky, when a spare, hard-faced man slouched down the main street and selected a pony from the dozen hitched beside Tim Geogehan's general store. The town, which in the daytime suffered from an excess of eye-searing light in its open spaces, confined its efforts at artificial lighting to the one store, the one saloon, and its neighbor, the Temple of Chance; so it was from a dusky void that the hard-faced man heard himself called by name.

"Tommy!" a subdued voice accosted him.

The hard-faced man made, it seemed, a very slight movement—a mere flick of the hand at his low-slung belt. But it was a movement perfectly appraised by the man in the shadows.

"Wait a minute!" the voice pleaded.

A moment later, his hands upraised, his pony's bridle-reins caught in the crook of one arm, a young man moved into the zone of light that shone bravely out through Tim Geogehan's back window.

"Don't shoot," he said, trying to control his nervousness before the weapon unwaveringly trained on him. "I'm—a friend."

For perhaps 15 seconds the newcomer and the hard-faced man examined each other with the unwinking scrutiny of those who take chances of life and death. The younger, with that lightning draw fresh in his mind, noted the sinister droop of a gray mustache over a hidden mouth, and shivered a little as his gaze met that of a pair of steel-blue eyes. The man with the gun saw before him a rather handsome face, marred, even in this moment of submission, by a certain desperation.

"What do you want?" he asked tersely.

"Can I put my hands down?" countered the other.

The lean man considered. "All things bein' equal," he said, "I think I'd rather you'd first tell me how you got round to callin' me Tommy. Been askin' people in the street?"

"No," said the boy. "I only got into town this afternoon, an' I ain't a fool anyway. I seen you ride in this afternoon, and the way folks backed away from you made me wonder who you was. Then I seen them gold-mounted guns of yours, an' of course I knew. Nobody ever had guns like them but Pecos Tommy. I could ha' shot you while you was gettin' your horse, if I'd been that way inclined."

The lean man bit his mustache. "Put 'em down. What do you want?"

"I want to join you."

"You want to *what*?"

"Yeah, I know it sounds foolish to you, mebbe," said the young man. "But listen—your side-kicker's in jail down in Rosewell. I figured I could take his place—anyway, till he got out. I know I ain't got any record, but I can ride, an' I can shoot the pips out of a ten-spot at ten paces, an'—I got a little job to bring into the firm, to start with."

The lean man's gaze narrowed. "Have, eh?" he asked, softly.

"It ain't anythin' like you go in for as a rule," said the boy, apologetically, "but it's a roll of cash an'—I guess it'll show you I'm straight. I only got on to it this afternoon. Kind of providential I should meet you right now."

The lean man chewed his mustache. His eyes did not shift. "Yeah," he said, slowly. "What you quittin' punchin' for?"

"Sick of it."

"Figurin' robbin' trains is easier money?"

"No," said the young man, "I ain't. But I like a little spice in life. They ain't none in punchin'."

"Got a girl?" asked the lean man.

The boy shook his head.

The hard-faced man nodded reflectively. "Well, what's

the job?" he asked.

The light from Geogehan's window was cut off by the body of a man who, cupping his hands about his eyes, stared out into the night, as if to locate the buzz of voices at the back of the store.

"If you're goin' to take me on," said the young man, "I can tell you while we're ridin' toward it. If you ain't—why, there's no need to go no further."

The elder slipped back into its holster the gold-mounted gun he had drawn, glanced once at the obscured window and again, piercingly, at the boy whose face now showed white in the light of the rising moon. Then he turned his pony and mounted. "Come on," he commanded.

Five minutes later the two had passed the limits of the town, heading for the low range of hills which encircled it to the south—and Will Arblaster had given the details of his job to the unemotional man at his side.

"How do you know the old guy's got the money?" came a level question.

"I saw him come out of the bank this afternoon, grinnin' all over his face an' stuffin' it into his pants pocket," said the boy. "An' when he was gone, I kind of inquired who he was. His name's Sanderson, and he lives in this yer cabin right ahead a mile. Looked kind of a soft old geezer—kind that'd give up without any trouble. Must ha' been quite some cash there judgin' by the size of the roll. But I guess when *you* ask him for it, he won't mind lettin' it go."

"I ain't goin' to ask him," said the lean man. "This is your job."

The boy hesitated. "Well, if I do it right," he asked, with a trace of tremor in his voice, "will you take me along with you sure?"

"Yeah—I'll take you along."

The two ponies rounded a shoulder of the hill. Before the riders there loomed, in the moonlight, the dark shape of a cabin, its windows unlighted.

The lean man chuckled. "He's out."

Will Arblaster swung off his horse. "Maybe," he said,

"but likely the money ain't. He started off home, an' if he's had to go out again, likely he's hid the money some place. Folks know *you're* about. I'm goin' to see."

Stealthily he crept toward the house. The moon went behind a cloud bank, and the darkness swallowed him. The lean man, sitting his horse, motionless, heard the rap of knuckles on the door—then a pause, the rattle of the latch. A moment later there came the heavy thud of a shoulder against wood—a cracking sound, and a crash as the door went down. The lean man's lips tightened. From within the cabin came the noise of one stumbling over furniture, then the fitful fire of a match illumined the windows. In the quiet, out there in the night, the man on the horse, 20 yards away, could hear the clumping of the other's boots on the rough board floor, and every rustle of the papers that he fumbled in his search. Another match scratched and sputtered, and then, with a hoarse cry of triumph, was flung down. Running feet padded across the short grass and Will Arblaster drew up, panting.

"Got it!" he gasped. "The old fool! Put it in a tea-canister right on the mantelshelf. Enough to choke a horse! Feel it!"

The lean man, unemotional as ever, reached down and took the roll of money. "Got another match?" he asked.

Willie struck one, and panting, watched while his companion, moistening a thumb, ruffled through the bills.

"Fifty tens," said the lean man. "Five hundred dollars. Guess I'll carry it."

His cold blue eyes turned downward, and focused again with piercing attention on the younger man's upturned face. The bills were stowed in a pocket of the belt right next one of those gold-mounted guns which, earlier in the evening, had covered Willie Arblaster's heart. For a moment, the lean man's hand seemed to hesitate over its butt; then, as Willie smiled and nodded, it moved away. The match burned out.

"Let's get out of here," the younger urged; whereupon the hand which had hovered over the gun-butt grasped Will Arblaster's shoulder.

"No, not yet," he said quietly, "not just yet. Get on your hawss, an' set still awhile."

The young man mounted. "What's the idea?"

"Why!" said the level voice at his right. "This is a kind of novelty to me. Robbin' trains, you ain't got any chance to see results, like—this here's different. Figure this old guy'll be back pretty soon. I'd like to see what he does when he finds his wad's gone. Ought to be amusin'!"

Arblaster chuckled uncertainly. "Ain't he liable to—"

"He can't see us," said the lean man with a certain new cheerfulness in his tone. "An' besides, he'll think we'd naturally be miles away. An' besides that, we're mounted, all ready."

"What's that?" whispered the young man, laying a hand on his companion's arm.

The other listened. "Probably him," he said. "Now stay still."

There were two riders—by their voices, a man and a girl. They were laughing as they approached the rear of the house, where, roughly made of old boards, stood Pa Sanderson's substitute for a stable. They put up the horses. Then their words came clearer to the ears of the listeners, as they turned the corner of the building, walking toward the front door.

"I feel mean about it, anyhow," said the girl's voice. "You going on living here, Daddy, while—"

"Tut-tut-tut!" said the old man. "What's five hundred to me? I ain't never had that much in a lump, an' shouldn't know what to do with it if I had. 'Sides, your Aunt Elviry didn't give it you for nothin'. 'If she wants to go to college,' says she, 'let her prove it by workin'. I'll pay half, but she's got to pay t'other half.' Well, you worked, an'— Where on earth did I put that key?"

There was a silence, broken by the grunts of the old man as he contorted himself in the search of his pockets. And then the girl spoke—the tone of her voice was the more terrible for the restraint she was putting on it.

"Daddy—the—the—did you leave the money in the house?"

"Yes. What is it?" cried the old man.

"Daddy—the door's broken down, and—"

There was a hoarse cry. Boot-heels stumbled across the boards, and again a match flared. Its pale light showed a girl standing in the doorway of the cabin, her hands clasped on her bosom—while beyond the wreckage of the door a bent figure with silver hair tottered away from the mantelshelf. In one hand Pa Sanderson held the flickering match, in the other a tin box.

"Gone!" he cried in his cracked voice. "Gone!"

Willie Arblaster drew a breath through his teeth and moved uneasily in his saddle. Instantly a lean, strong hand, with a grip like steel, fell on his wrist and grasped it.

The man behind the hand chuckled. "Listen!" he said.

"Daddy—Daddy—don't take on so—please don't," came the girl's voice, itself trembling with repressed tears. There was a scrape of chair legs on the floor as she forced the old man into his seat by the fireplace. He hunched there, his face in his hands, while she struck a match and laid the flame to the wick of the lamp on the table. As it burned up she went back to her father, knelt by him, and threw her arms about his neck.

"Now, now, now!" she pleaded. "Now, Daddy, it's all right. Don't take on so. It's all right."

But he would not be comforted.

"I can't replace it!" cried Pa Sanderson, dropping trembling hands from his face. "It's gone! Two years you've been away from me; two years you've slaved in a store; and now I've—"

"Hush, hush!" the girl begged. "Now, Daddy—it's all right. I can go on working, and—"

With a convulsive effort, the old man got to his feet. "Two years more slavery, while some skunk drinks your money, gambles it—throws it away!" he cried. "Curse him! Whoever it is, curse him! Where's God's justice? What's a man goin' to believe when years of scrapin' like your aunt done, an' years of slavin' like yours in Laredo there, an' all our happiness today can be wiped out by a damned thief in a minute?"

The girl put her little hand over her father's mouth. "Don't, Daddy," she choked. "It only makes it worse. Come and lie down on your bed, and I'll make you some coffee. Don't cry, Daddy darling. Please."

Gently, like a mother with a little child, she led the heart-broken old man out of the watchers' line of vision, out of the circle of lamplight. More faintly, but still with heart-rending distinctness, the listeners could hear the sounds of weeping.

The lean man sniffed, chuckled, and pulled his bridle.

"Some circus!" he said appreciatively. "C'mon, boy."

His horse moved a few paces, but Will Arblaster's did not. The lean man turned in his saddle.

"Ain't you comin'?" he asked.

For ten seconds, perhaps, the boy made no answer. Then he urged his pony forward until it stood side by side with his companion's. "No," he said. "An'—an' I ain't goin' to take that money, neither."

"Huh?"

The voice was slow and meditative. "Don't know as ever I figured what this game meant," he said. "Always seemed to me that all the hardships was on the stick-up man's side—gettin' shot at an' chased and so on. Kind of fun, at that. Never thought 'bout—old men cryin'."

"That ain't my fault," said the lean man.

"No," said Will Arblaster, still very slowly. "But I'm goin' to take that money back. You didn't have no trouble gettin' it, so you don't lose nothin'."

"Suppose I say I won't let go of it?" suggested the lean man with a sneer.

"Then," snarled Arblaster, "I'll blow your damned head off an' take it! Don't you move, you! I've got you covered. I'll take the money out myself."

His revolver muzzle under his companion's nose, he snapped open the pocket of the belt and extracted the roll of bills. Then, regardless of a possible shot in the back, he swung off his horse and shambled, with the mincing gait of the born horseman, into the lighted doorway of the cabin. The lean man, unemotional as ever, sat per-

fectly still, looking alternately at the cloud-dappled sky and at the cabin, from which now came a murmur of voices harmonizing with a strange effect of joy, to the half-heard bass of the night-wind.

It was a full ten minutes before Will Arblaster reappeared in the doorway alone, and made, while silhouetted against the light, a quick movement of his hand across his eyes, then stumbled forward through the darkness toward his horse. Still the lean man did not move.

"I'm—sorry," said the boy as he mounted. "But—"

"I ain't," said the lean man quietly. "What do you think I made you stay an' watch for, you young fool?"

The boy made no reply. Suddenly the hair prickled on the back of his neck and his jaw fell. "Say," he demanded hoarsely at last. "Ain't you Pecos Tommy?"

The lean man's answer was a short laugh.

"But you got his guns, an' the people in Longhorn all kind of fell back!" the boy cried. "If you ain't him, who are you?"

The moon had drifted from behind a cloud and flung a ray of light across the face of the lean man as he turned it, narrow-eyed, toward Arblaster. The pallid light picked out with terrible distinctness the grim lines of that face—emphasized the cluster of sun-wrinkles about the corners of the piercing eyes and marked as if with underscoring black lines the long sweep of the fighting jaw.

"Why," said the lean man dryly, "I'm the sheriff that killed him yesterday. Let's be ridin' back."

The Rider of Loma Escondida

By J. Frank Dobie

"Boys, ever' time I camp at this crossing I think of the way Jeff Cassidy got waylaid and murdered between here and Loma Escondida."

The speaker was Captain Crouch. He was with his outfit at the old Presidio Crossing on the Leona River near the border. Supper was over.

"Yes," Captain Crouch went on, "that was a long time ago, and tough hombres in this country were thicker'n fiddlers in hell. Horse thieves was so bad that a man couldn't hardly keep a gentle saddle horse without hiding him in a thicket after dark and then sleeping by him. Money was safer'n horses, but a man with a good horse and money both had better be keerful.

"Now, about Jeff Cassidy. He was representative for the 7 D's, a big outfit. Well, he left San 'tonio one day for the old H-Triangle Ranch below here to receive a herd of steers and start 'em up the trail. Like the custom was at the time, he carried money to pay for the stuff in his saddle pockets. He had five thousand pesos, gold, the balance to be paid when the cattle were sold in Kansas and the money brung back.

"The second night out Jeff slept in Friotown. He left there at daylight next morning, coming this way. He was alone, and was riding a little creamy dun pony that I'll tell you about d'reckly. He'd got into Friotown after dark and somehow had failed to learn that the sheriff was going down to inspect brands on the herd, or he might have had company. The sheriff left Frio 'long latish in the morning. When he got about halfway between Loma Escondida and this crossing where we're camped, he found Jeff and his dun horse in the middle of the road both deader'n thunder.

"He hit the trail in a high lope, struck a couple of cowboys that joined him, and together they overtook the murderers somewhere this side of Eagle Pass. Everybody knowed them Newton boys wasn't no 'count and was rustling cattle, but nobody would have suspicioned them of killing a man in cold blood like they did Jeff Cassidy. The case was plain as daylight and the Newtons owned up. Still, they didn't have any of the gold with them, though the pockets had been stripped off Jeff's saddle. Furthermore, neither Jim nor Tom Newton could be forced to tell where the stuff was. They was hung, of course, and—"

But at this point the Captain's narrative was interrupted by an unceremonious announcement from the cook, Alfredo, that the camp was out of coffee.

Alfredo was a new *cocinero*, and in terms free and vigorous Captain Crouch expressed his opinion of a cook who would leave headquarters without enough coffee and not say anything about the shortage until it was nearly time to cook breakfast. The fact that Alfredo had carefully put his coffee in a big can and then loaded on in its place a similar can containing frijoles did not remedy the mistake.

"Well," concluded the Captain, "there ain't but one thing to do, and that's for somebody to ride to Charlie Trebes's commissary and get the coffee."

It was ten miles to the Trebes ranch. Twenty miles on horseback will not leave the rider much of a summer's night for sleeping. None of the hands said anything. It was not for them to say.

Otis Coggins, who had been working on the Crouch ranch since boyhood, was patching a stirrup-leather. He was a tall, swarthy man under thirty.

"Otis," the Captain went on, "I reckon you're the man to go for the coffee. You know old man Trebes better'n anybody else, and if you get back here by breakfast time you can stay in camp and sleep all morning. Better get about ten pounds, I guess."

"All right," said Otis. Then, addressing a Mexican, he

ordered, "Go get me that Trigeño horse. It's lucky I staked him."

"Guess I taught you never to be caught afoot, even if your back was broke and you couldn't fork a pillow," remarked Captain Crouch. "That reminds me—"

"But, Captain," Otis broke in, still mending on his saddle, "don't you reckon them Newton boys must 'a' buried that gold around somewhere clost to where they killed Jeff Cassidy? They shore aimed to make use of it some day."

"Yes, I guess they did hide it somewhere," Captain Crouch agreed, his mind brought back to the story he was telling when the *cocinero* interrupted. "I don't know as anybody's ever looked for it much. There never was anything that hurt me more'n Jeff's death. He and me had been side pardners—reg'lar yoke mates, you might say—for years. I guess we broke enough horses together to furnish a dozen outfits going up the trail. There was still some mustangs in the country, and one day we laid into a little bunch that had their bellies too full of water to run much and roped one apiece. Mine was a purty black filly; I broke her neck a-trying to get the saddle on her. Jeff's was a creamy dun stallion with a black stripe down his back about the width of your hand—a *bayo coyote*, as the Mexicans call a horse of that color. He was all life and bottom, and Jeff got so he didn't want to ride anything else. He was riding him when he was killed. I always figgered one of them Newton boys made a misshot and killed the horse accidentally. They'd 'a' been mighty glad to take him as well as the gold."

The Mexican had arrived with Otis's horse. The saddle was thrown on him, and a sack for the coffee was tied on the saddle. With an *adios* the rider was off.

Otis Coggins was a silent kind of man. He liked to be alone. His route lay through a vast flat country of mesquite, catclaw *huajilla*, *chapote*, prickly pear, and other kinds of brush common to Southwest Texas. The only break on the plain that his brush-lined road traversed was a solitary hill known far and wide as Loma Escondida.

It is *escondida*—hidden—because the brush is so high and thick around it that a rider cannot see it until he is almost upon it.

The moon was full; as usual the sky was flawlessly clean; one might have read ordinary book print in the moonlight. As he approached Loma Escondida, not a sound but the pad of his horse's hoofs and the squeak of saddle leather breaking the silence, Otis Coggins noticed an object, or, rather, two objects, in the road some distance ahead of him. They were partly in the shadow of high brush, and at first he took them to be a cow and calf. Cattle in a brush country often bed down in open roads. But presently Otis saw that the larger of the objects was a horse and that the lesser was a man apparently humped over on the ground. The man soon straightened, mounted, and started up the hill ahead of Otis.

Now, the road that Captain Crouch's most trusted hand was traveling was a private ranch road. It was his business to know who was riding around in his employer's pasture at night. He hailed the rider. There was no response. He set spurs to his horse to overtake the trespasser, and, without hard running, was soon close upon him. He saw—saw plainly—that the horse ahead was dun-colored with a black stripe down his back. "He's a *bayo coyote*, like Jeff Cassidy's mustang," Otis reflected.

Near the top of the hill he was actually by the stranger's side; neither spoke a word and Otis could not get a view of the rider's face. Then suddenly the stranger pulled out of the road into some half-open ground and headed straight for a stark, dead mesquite tree, the trunk of which was exceptionally large. Otis knew that tree; he recalled how late one evening while he was driving a bunch of saddle horses over Loma Escondida, something—he did not see what—jumped out of this very tree and stampeded the remuda so that they ran two miles before he could get around them.

He saw something now that he did not believe. He saw horse and rider head into the tree—straight into it—and disappear. The ground beyond was open enough that

anything traversing it would have been plainly visible.

He pulled up his horse and looked, just looked. Like most other range men, he had a prosaic head that absolutely refused to harbor ghosts and other such superstitions common among the Mexicans. He guessed maybe he had been half asleep and did not know it. Yet he could not have been mistaken about seeing the man down by his horse back in the road, the man mounting and riding off, the dun horse with a black stripe down his back. All the details were clear.

He rode on now to get the coffee, got it, answered a few questions about the cow work, and started back.

He rode absorbed in contemplation of the strange rider and horse. He determined to investigate the mesquite tree into which they had vanished. Once he turned in his saddle to look behind him, and down a straight stretch of the road saw a coyote following. Off in the brush he heard now and then the lonely wail of other coyotes; he liked to hear them.

True to its name, Loma Escondida did not reveal itself until he was at it, and then Otis saw something that made him know he had not dreamed the rider on the *bayo coyote*. There he was, trotting his horse leisurely up the hill, going in the opposite direction from what he had been going when seen earlier in the night. Otis reined up. He heard distinctly the sound of the dun's hoofs on the dry, hard ground. Those very material sounds made him realize that some trick had been played on him, and he resolved to end the mystery. He knew that his Trigeno horse could put up a hot race, even if the race led clear to camp on the Leona; and if it came to running in the brush, he wore his regular protection of ducking jacket and leather leggings and he considered himself second to no man in skill as a "brush popper."

Vámonos! The stranger was a full hundred yards ahead, up the hill. For a minute he continued the leisurely trot, but when Otis had lessened the interval by half he saw the man ahead of him strike into a run. Now the squat top of the hill was reached; Otis was gaining. He was not

more than 20 yards behind. They were coming to the half-opening into which the mysterious rider had before turned out of the road. Here he suddenly turned again. Otis was not surprised. In less time than it takes to draw a six-shooter he had the horn string around his rope loose and a loop shaken out.

"*Ojala!*" he yelled. "Damn you, if I can't catch you, I'll rope you." But he was too late. Just as he prepared to cast his loop, the pursued rider and horse disappeared into the dead mesquite. There was no sound of impact. Otis himself dodged under a low-hanging limb of the old tree so as to be upon the tricky stranger on the other side. On the other side was nothing but bush, moonlight, vacancy, and silence.

Otis got down and led his horse up to the old mesquite. The first episode had been a surprise. The second, with every sense of the observer alert and expectant, was overwhelming.

"Have I eaten some *raiz diabólica* [peyote, "dry whisky"] to be seeing things?" Otis asked himself aloud, for he was determined not to be awed. Then he answered the question with "No I ain't, and I haven't been smoking *marihuana* weed either." There is a vague belief among some of the more ignorant Mexicans that after death their souls enter the mesquite—the mesquite that feeds them such good beans during life. As he rolled a cigarette, Otis Coggins remembered this superstition with contempt. The mesquite had never been sacred to him; he had cursed its thorns a thousand times.

He determined to give the tree a thorough examination. First he bent over to look at the ground around it. The moon, still high, revealed nothing but his own horse's tracks. The tree itself, though dead, was far from rotten. However, his eye caught a long groove in it. He felt the groove with his hands. It had been made with an ax long ago.

With face averted, he was slowly circling the old trunk when his boot caught on a flat rock. It was in shadow and he lit a match to examine more closely for other marks

on that side of the tree. Glancing down, he noticed a dull glint of metal. He picked it up, lit another match; it was a \$20 gold piece.

If there was one coin, there must be several. In order to clear the ground for closer inspection, Otis lifted the rock out of place. He hardly needed the light of a match to see what now lay exposed. It was a pair of old saddle pockets. They were so rotten that they almost fell apart when he picked them up. Several coins fell out.

"Jeff Cassidy's gold right where the Newton boys hid it!" Otis exclaimed aloud.

He was not excited. He never got excited. Calmly he went to his saddle, took down the sack, tied the coffee into one end of it, and then secured his find in the other end. Counting it could wait.

When he got into camp on the Leona, Captain Crouch and the *cocinero* were already up.

"I've shore been wanting that coffee," the Captain greeted him. "The water's been bilin' half an hour."

"Well, here it is," Otis sang out, at the same time dismounting and untying the sack, from which he brought to view only a part of the contents. "Hurry up, *cocinero*, I'd like a sip of coffee myself."



Cows in the Dark

By Eugene Cunningham

INTO FARWELL, Shelley Raines came riding, looking for little Ike Robey, the sheriff. He came singing, too, in a low, almost whispering baritone that had given him the nickname, down on the border where the Rangers rode, of "Shoutin' Shelley":

*"'Twere a bright an' shiny mawnin';
Ol' Millennium, she were come;
St. Pete, he were the roundup boss;
The herds was millin' some.
Up the Heaven Trail come lopin'—
Like his mind's on hefty things—
A long an' limber sad-face gambler
On a yaller hawss 'ith wings.
Says St. Pete; 'Now—'*

"This-yere county seat," remarked Shelley, interrupting his song, "she looks like right smart o' a place, Big Boy: saloons, stores, saloons, houses an' more saloons. Yes, sir! She's right natural! Come on, Rojo! Rattle yo' hocks. Yuh're just about two whoops an' a medium holler from breakfast."

He tickled Rojo's flank with the rowel and the tall bay quickened its effortless running walk down the main street of Farwell. Shelley slouched in the saddle and eyed the rambling place. There was the usual utilization of the road to and from the town as a "street"; the usual line of low, 'dobe buildings along each side of it, housing general stores, saloons, gambling places and the homes of the townspeople. Great, gnarled cottonwoods and slender poplars gave a shade grateful in that sun-scorched land; welcome even now, early of a late spring morning, when the sky was magically blue and dotted with fleets of snowy, golden-edged cirrus clouds.

It being Farwell's breakfast hour, there were few people on the street. But on the dirt-floored veranda of the Open Door Saloon, a half-dozen hard-faced cowboys, waddling out to their mounts at the hitch-rack, had halted and half-turned sullenly toward the saloon door.

Shelley looked them over swiftly, observing that their horses were branded with an odd corkscrew iron. Then he saw the ill-assorted pair in the doorway and thereafter almost forgot the overalled and heavily-armed riders. For, outlined against the black rectangle of the door, stood a lean giant—six feet six, he must have stood, even when bootless—a fierce-tempered giant, Shelley fancied, judging by the deep-lined, savage hatchet-face, the murky glint of the tiny black eyes, the cruel set of the lipless mouth.

Beside this towering figure—grinning amusedly at the chafing cowboys who listened to the giant's apparent orders—was a slim, dark, cat-nervous youth, very brave in orange-hued shirt, scarlet neckerchief, vest of hairy, red-and-white spotted cowhide, Mexican chaparejos, snow-white sombrero and embroidered boots. He stood with arms akimbo in a way that seemed habitual; with thumbs hooked in the crossed cartridge belts that held up two buckhorn-handled Colts in holsters, the toes of which were held to his boot-tops by rawhide thongs. Dwarfed as he was by his companion's great height, for all that he was a man to watch, Shelley thought, recognizing the marks of the gunman.

Shelley rode on and the eyes of the pair in the door turned curiously upon the rangy, yellow-haired six-footer in worn cowboy boots, faded overalls and fringed and embroidered jacket of buckskin that was memento of Shelley's time in the Frio country. They seemed to study the J-Bar brand on Rojo, and at this Shelley's steel-gray eyes twinkled and a corner of his wide, whimsical mouth lifted. He fancied that none in this section of the Territory was apt to identify him through Rojo's brand; it was many a mile to the old J-Bar horse-ranch in East Texas.

There was a public corral near the center of town.

Having unsaddled the red horse and seen him fed, Shelley loafed across the street to a Chinese restaurant and with much pleasure ordered an enormous meal of beefsteaks and fried eggs and soda biscuits.

At the far end of the rough counter sat the restaurant's only other customer, a wide-shouldered, lean-hipped man of twenty-four or -five, as tall as Shelley himself, in white silk shirt and blue neckerchief and fine, gray woolen trousers. The high-crowned black Stetson, the handmade half-boots, would have made any proper cowboy sick with envy. Around the slim waist was a filled cartridge belt, and in the holster sagging upon the right hip was a pearl-handled, gold- and silver-plated Colt. One flashing glance Shelley gave to the stranger's finery; then his gaze came back to the lean, sardonic, olive-hued face, the length of which was accentuated by the tiny black mustache and imperial; and its melancholy belied by dancing turquoise-blue eyes.

He felt drawn to this man, but made no sign. The Territory was no place for careless making of acquaintances. So, when his breakfast came, he worked methodically at its demolishing until the great platter was empty, then leaned back before his fourth cup of scalding black coffee to make a cigarette.

He sent a puff of smoke ceilingward at the flies clustered there and considered his problem. He was virtually at a standstill and there seemed scant reason to believe that wizened little Ike Robey—more gunman than detective, by Jim Manning's account—would be able to help him where he had failed to help himself. The intended ending of his trail into this untamed commonwealth, the Territory, from the JM ranch over beyond the Diamond River, would be the double discovery of the parties who had removed some 300 head of JM strays from the Smoky River breaks and the buyer thereof.

"An' all I know for certain—besides my name—is that somebody run off them cows an' somebody up in this country bought 'em," he reflected dourly.

He shook his head and got up. As he paid his bill and

wandered out, the big, blue-eyed man watched him thoughtfully.

Far up the street, at the very end of town, he found the sheriff's office, a weatherbeaten 'dobe. The door was open, and inside, perched in a rawhide-bottomed chair tilted back against the wall, he saw a tiny, gray figure with hat-brim low upon outjutting nose. Upon the little man's tattered vest was a dingy star. He seemed asleep, but when Shelley stepped inside he jerked his head dextrously and the hat flipped back to clear as steady, cool a pair of sun-squinted blue eyes as Shelley had ever faced.

"Howdy," drawled Shelley. "Yuh're Ike Robey?"

The sheriff nodded silently, without change of expression in his seamed, brown face as he studied the big newcomer.

"Jim Mannin' told me that if I had to amble up this far I should come to see yuh."

"Fer whut?"

"Oh, nothin' much. Just to gi' us a hand to locate 300 JM cows that took unto themselves li'l white wings an' flapped out o' the breaks o' the Smoky—"

"The hell!" remarked the sheriff expressively. "I reckon Jim Mannin', he figgered mebbe them cows come a-flyin' up to Farwell an' right through my back winder! Or else, mebbe he reckons I been takin' lessons in how to tell fortunes sence I see him last! The hell! Has he looked under his bunk fer 'em?"

There was silence for a time. Shelley seated himself comfortably upon a corner of the battered kitchen table that served the sheriff of Casner County for desk. He rolled a cigarette—Mex' fashion, upon his thigh. This last the sheriff noted, as he had observed the canny hang of the long-barreled Colt upon this tall young man's right side; the general air of efficiency about him.

"An' whut might yuh call yo'se'f, son?" he demanded suddenly.

"Raines."

The sheriff's chair came thudding down upon all four legs. The sheriff came bouncing up to his feet:

"Not—not 'Shoutin' Shelley'?" he cried incredulously. "Not the Ranger sergeant."

"I ain't in the Rangers no more. Quit 'em goin' on two year back. I was cap'n o' guards on the Santa Fe Railroad for a while. Then I done a spell o' dep'ty marshalin' in El Paso. But I got skeered o' gettin' permanent cross-eyes tryin' to look four ways to onct, so I went to work for Jim Mannin'."

"Well, I'm damned!" proclaimed the little sheriff. He thrust out a brown paw out of all proportion to his diminutive size, "Yes, sir, I sho' am! Son, when I heerd about yuh follerin' Frio Jake's outfit acrost the river an' cleanin' 'em up an' bringin' in whut was left all hogtied, I says to Mig' Cervantes—Mig's my dep'ty—'I sho' aim to meet up with that boy Shelley sometime an' say howdy! I aim to tell him that if he ain't a real, sho' 'nough Ranger, he'll sho' do till a real one comes along!'"

He pumped Shelley's hand up and down, beaming upon him the while.

"Who do yuh reckon'd buy our stuff—up this-a-way?" inquired Shelley, when he had regained his seat on the table. "I figger 'twas brought up here."

"Hell! Yuh might's well ask who lives up yere!" cried the sheriff bitterly. "Shelley, the's three honest men in this-yere neck o' the woods—three as I know about: 'Three Finger' Joe Peel, the sto'keeper an' jedge, Mig' Cervantes an' yo's truly. Joe, he was jest elected an' he ain't had time to do a heap yit. But he's a-getherin' odds an' ends together, an' if he don't git his fool self killed off we'll sho' clean up right smart o' these-yere long-rope gents. But, seems like ever' dam' hawss-thief an' cow rustler an' murderer in the world is camped yere."

"They do say," nodded Shelley, "over on the Diamond, that ever' lariat in the Territory grows 462 feet long an' that cows has from 19 to 37 calves per yearly annum."

"Not more'n an inch an' a half from gospel truth! But whut've yuh found out about yo' cows? Whut makes yuh think they come this far pawtheast?"

"Well, we found where the thieves'd camped over on

the Smoky while they was roundin' up our strays. Jim Mannin' figured mebbe I could locate somethin' over here in the Territory, so I come ridin'. But the' wasn't no trail an' nobody'd talk 'cows' a-tall. So I kept a-comin', an' three-four mile the other side o' that deep clear creek about 40 miles from here, I come upon the trail o' quite a bunch o' cows headin' this way. They'd turned into the trail there from some'r's to the south. I followed along an' finally I see a dead cow off to one side. She was branded—near's I could read it—Circle Cross-in-a-Box."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' that the new brand was a mighty pore job o' covering the old JM! Well, 25 or 30 miles from here, the herd turned straight nawth at a big bunch o' cottonwoods by a spring. 'Twas a week-old trail but I followed a while, long enough to see them cows was bein' pushed due nawth. Then I made a *pasear* into Farwell to see what yuh could tell me."

"Turned nawth at Branch's Grove," nodded the little sheriff, drumming upon his leg with stubby fingertips. "Hmm! Might be headin' 'most anywheres. The's minin' camps up that-a-way that'd buy beef—an', o' course, the fort an' the reservation, if the fellas had contracts. Might be aimin' fer Kansas, fer that matter."

"They come into the main trail the other side o' Dead Man's Creek. Hmm! The's fo' or five big outfits in that country an' some small ones—all dam' bad: D-Bar-D an' Lazy K an' XL an' Art Taylor's Rattlesnake. Taylor, he's worst o' the whole bunch. Aims to be a hellin' big man in the Territory. Folks calls him 'King o' the Rattlesnake' an' he likes it. Hmm! If ever me'n Joe Peel gits anything on that long-coupled jigger, he won't look like no king! I'll sho' as hell make him look like a two-spot!" Suddenly he smacked his thigh. "Trail was a week old, yuh say? Why, Joe Peel, he was snoopin' 'round that country jest about a week ago. Mebbe he picked up somethin' that'd help!"

"W'y—" it was a drawl from the doorway behind them—"mabbe she's pick up somethin', but—she's never tell us w'at she's find."

Shelley's swift half-turn brought him face-to-face with the big, black-haired, black-mustached man he had marked in the Chinese restaurant. The turquoise-blue eyes glittered now like greenish ice and the long, melancholy face was very grim.

"Whut yuh drivin' at, Mig'?" cried the sheriff, coming to his feet tensely, leaning forward like a crouching cat. "Yuh don't mean—"

Slowly, the deputy nodded. "Me, I wonder w'y she's not open up them store. So, I'm go around to them back-door. I'm yell. Joe Peel, she don' say nothin'. I'm pound them dam' door; she's push open. I'm go inside an'—*Dios á Dios á Dios!* She's lie on them floor an' she's dead."

Ike Robey's seamed old face was working savagely. His silence Shelley somehow felt to express sorrow and rage more effectively than any outburst of words could have done. He understood flashingly how closely the dead judge and the wizened little sheriff had been associated in their almost lone attempt for law and order in this desperately lawless region.

"Le's—le's go see about it," Ike Robey mumbled after a moment.

He led the way, with face like iron now. Shelley fell into step beside Mig' Cervantes in the sheriff's rear. Mig' had betrayed no surprise at finding Shelley in the sheriff's office; now his mind seemed to be wholly upon the tragedy.

"Town know about it yet?" asked Shelley, and Mig' shook his head impatiently, without looking at his companion.

They came shortly to the 'dobe building which bore across its veranda roof a faded sign announcing: *Gen'l Merchandise—Joe Peel, Prop.* At one end of the grayish-white rectangle, immediately following the name, was the flat imprint of a man's right palm in black paint, a print conspicuous by the complete absence of the third finger. Mig' Cervantes observed the direction of Shelley's gaze.

"One time, there's another Joe Peel w'at's live in this country. These Joe Peel, here, she's not like them other

Joe Peel fella. People, she's come here an' call these Joe Peel them other Joe Peel and these Joe Peel she's git mad like the hell. So, she's git one can with them black paint; she's git one ladder. She's climb up here an' she's stick them hand in them paint. She's slap them hand on them sign—like you're see. Then she's climb down an' she's stand them sawed-off shotgun by them counter an' she's say, 'Now, by God! Them first fella w'at's come in an' not call me "Three Finger" Joe Peel, she's git them dam' buck-shot!' Oh, she's one fine man, them Three Finger Joe Peel!"

They followed the sheriff around the building and into the backroom in which Joe Peel had lived. It was too dark to distinguish more than mere outlines, but three pairs of eyes saw all too plainly the dark, motionless bulk upon the floor. Mig' Cervantes tiptoed over to a window and pulled back the checked gingham curtain that hung upon a string. The yellow morning sunlight flooded the room, revealing the scene of a terrific struggle.

"The' was more'n one done this!" cried Ike Robey instantly. "Joe, yere, he was stronger'n ary bull yuh ever see! It'd be two men, anyway, that could handle him in a fair fight."

Shelley had been staring curiously about. Normally, he saw, this was a room of the most precise order, with simple furniture and utensils methodically arranged. But now the rawhide-bottomed cot was broken half in two, as by the heavy impact of falling bodies; a table which had borne dishes upon a clean red tablecloth was overturned in a far corner and dishes were broken over the whole floor. One significant thing he observed: upon the frame of the cot was hung a holster and in it still was Joe Peel's long-barreled .45 Colt. So the dead man had either been surprised abruptly, or had met his murderers without alarm.

Joe Peel was past middle age; a man of medium height, but with shoulders and chest like a gorilla's. His thinning, gray-shot hair was of a belligerent reddish hue and even in death his skin kept a florid tinge. He lay upon his twisted left arm in such a fashion that Shelley believed he

must have been dead when he fell forward; even a dying man—he thought—would have moved instinctively to straighten an arm so twisted. Blood-dabbled from the pool that surrounded him, his three-fingered right hand was stiffly outflung. He was almost naked; he had battled for his life in a long, old-fashioned nightshirt and it had been torn to ribbons in the struggle.

Ike Robey motioned to Mig' Cervantes and together they turned the body over. Joe Peel had been shot twice through the breast, at such short range that the burning powder had set his nightshirt afire. So close, Shelley nodded to himself, that the explosions would have been too muffled to have carried outside the thick-walled room.

Ike Robey got up and looked around helplessly, shaking his head. Shelley was still moving about. Ranger training was strong in him; he had quite forgotten that he was merely one of the JM hands and that this murder was for the duly elected sheriff to untangle. He was trying to reconstruct the story of the murder just as if he had been a Ranger sergeant called upon to capture the criminals. Ike Robey watched him and after an instant the baffled expression upon his old face gave way to one of eager hope.

"Son!" he cried. "Son! I don't see a thing to go on. But I've heerd all kinds o' things about yuh: they say yuh can look at a dog's track an' tell whut color hair's in the end o' his tail. If you can help me out yere—"

At which, Mig' Cervantes' black brows climbed. He had never seen Ike Robey offer to play second fiddle before. Observing this, Ike Robey turned to his deputy and gestured with a thumb at Shelley.

"Mig', this yere's Shelley Raines. He come up yere a-huntin' some cows that's been stole off'n Jim Mannin'. You've heerd me talk about Shelley."

"All them dam' day, sometimes!" grinned Mig'. He thrust out a steely-fingered hand at Shelley. "But, *por supuesto*, I'm proud like the hell for to meet you, Shelley."

"There was two men, all right," Shelley said slowly. "Not over-big men, I figger it, an' about the same size—though that's just a guess: their feet's about the same

size an' they take about the same length step. They slipped into the room through that li'l side door, yonder—I reckon Peel'd kept it nailed up so long that he never noticed how the bar'd been monkeyed with. They must've fixed things beforehand. They was right on top o' him 'fore he waked up; he never had time to git his gun out o' this holster, yuh see.

"He must've got up off'n the floor after the cot broke—got up liftin' the two fellas! One got him from behind an' held him by the arm, while the other got a gun out an' shot him twice. Then they sneaked over to the window an' the side door an' listened. Never heard nothin', I reckon, so they come back an' got the writin' they was after."

Mig' Cervantes nodded agreement. His turquoise-blue eyes had been flashing from point to point on the floor as if following the chart which Shelley was demonstrating. Ike Robey, too, could see plainly the red imprint of tiptoeing feet at window and side door.

"Me, I'm half Spanish, half Navajo," said Mig' Cervantes. "I'm live with them Navajos; I'm hunt with them bow an' arrow; I'm trail with them Injun boy. Shelley, she's got them eye like them Injun."

"Whut yuh drivin' at—'bout the writin'?" asked Ike Robey. "Whut'd Joe be a-writin' 'bout, that anybody'd want?"

"Didn't yuh say he was a-gatherin' odds an' ends about these rustlers an' murderers? My guess is that he'd put them odds an' ends down on paper an' that somebody knowed it an' come to git 'em."

"He did! Never told me 'bout it but onct. But he was buildin' up cases ag'in' a lot o' long ropers!"

From a corner beneath a stool Shelley brought a battered ledger. Many sheets had been roughly torn out of the front. He flung it back and shrugged.

"Well, looks to me like we got to figger who would've done the job, then see which ones o' that crowd was in town last night."

"Huh!" cried Mig' Cervantes. "Ever' dam' thief in these dam' Territory, she's be glad to kill Three Finger Joe

Peel. An' mos' ever' dam' thief, she's in town las' night: Frenchy Jardine w'at's own them D-Bar-D; Lon Mabry from them Lazy K; Kelly from them Ladder-E; Art Taylor from them Rattlesnake. Oh, ever'body but them Johnny Sayre w'at's have them JS. We're have one dam' big night las' night. Them Rattlesnake boys, she's git mos' drunk. *Por Dios!* Me, I'm stop three-four fights."

"Rattlesnake? Is that that corkscrew iron?"

"Si! She's Art Taylor's brand. Them Rattlesnake boys, she's ride out w'en you're ride in this mornin'. Art Taylor, she's stand in them Open Door Saloon by them Al Koenig; she's one big man; one dam' mean man!"

"Yeh, I seen him," nodded Shelley. "Well, Sheriff, seems to me the play's not to make no cracks around town. Just sort o' snoop around an' see which o' these fellas wasn't in sight all night. Ain't much to go on, but she's all we got right now. Le's go break the news to the town. I want to kind o' look over these prom'inent citizens o' yo's, when we tell 'em."

In the Open Door Saloon, where Ike Robey made public announcement of the judge's murder, Shelley particularly watched the gigantic Art Taylor and his shadow, Al Koenig. But neither showed any emotion beyond intense interest in the details of the crime. Al Koenig, indeed, grinned slightly as if the news pleased him. There were others of the dead man's enemies here. Mig' Cervantes identified them for Shelley in an undertone. They stared furtively at one another, but betrayed no evidence of guilt or even nervousness.

"Who's this Al Koenig?" Shelley asked, when they were again on the street.

"W'y, she's come to Farwell las' year an' bring some ponies. She's sells 'em an' she's drink, she's gamble, she's dance an' make love to them Mex' girls down in Hogtown. She's kill two men here—two fas' gunmen. Kill 'em fair. Then she's go away an' this year she's come back, ridin' with them Art Taylor. She's drink an' she's gamble an' she's dance with them Mex' girls. But she's kill no-

body—yet.”

“Fast with the guns, huh?”

“Fast like the hell!” nodded Mig’ emphatically. “Faster lots faster—as me. Faster, even, as Ike Robey. Faster as—Shelley Raines—*quien sabe?*”

Shelley grinned. Mig’, watching him sidelong, seemed disappointed at his noncommittal silence.

In the cool of late afternoon they buried Joe Peel in the little graveyard northeast of town that was almost visible from the sheriff’s office. The town turned out *en masse*. Some of those present were real friends of the dead man; curiosity, Shelley thought, drew the others. Shelley, who had been vainly puzzling the mystery during the afternoon, watched unceasingly for any tiny sign that might serve as clue to the murderers. He found none and, observing the hard faces of those whom Mig’ had listed as enemies of Joe Peel, he admitted that although Art Taylor and dark little Al Koenig might be as bad as humans got, they were by no means so criminal of countenance as others there.

The three of them, Ike Robey, Mig’ and Shelley, drew out of the returning crowd and entered the sheriff’s office when the funeral was over. Shelley perched himself upon the table and made a cigarette, staring blankly at the far wall. Ike Robey and Mig’ watched him curiously. Each noted that the lean, brown face was shadowily grim, although wherein that grimness lay they would have been hard put to say. But it was the shift of expression in the wide, usually whimsical mouth that was most marked. Now, when Shelley smiled faintly, it was a sardonic tightening of the lips.

“Ike!” Shelley grunted suddenly. “S’pose’n I was to find out who stole them JM cows an’ he was right here in Farwell today?”

“Why, if yuh had the deadwood on him, I’d sling his hind-end into the calaboose! But yuh’d have to be mighty sho’. Yuh know, this ain’t no town to be monkeyin’ with less’n yuh’re mighty sho’!”

“S’pose’n I never had nothin’ but a mighty good idee

an' when I was tryin' to work a bluff on the fella he started somethin'?"

"Well, 'fore I made sech a bluff as that, I'd kind o' look over the hang o' my six-shooter. 'Less, o' course, I was usin' a Winchester."

"Well," grunted Shelley, slipping down from the table-end, "s'pose we go downtown. After that funeral, I feel like about three fingers o' Old Jordan. What say?"

There were a good many men in the Open Door Saloon, but neither Art Taylor nor Al Koenig was visible in the barroom. The dance-floor and gambling rooms were not yet in operation. Most of the ranchers, cowboys, miners and townsfolk were taking an appetizer in anticipation of supper, while they gabbled about the murder of Joe Peel.

Shelley had his drink with Ike Robey and Mig', then went wandering about until he found a banjo upon the battered piano in the dancehall. With this, he went back into the barroom. The drinkers watched expectantly, for in the old cow-country, as in camp or castle of the Middle Ages, the troubadour was always an honored, welcome figure.

Shelley grinned at them. He felt like singing today, and when he was in the mood he was well worth listening to. The lilt of his soft, whispering baritone was known, as were the songs he was continually making, almost wherever the Rangers had hidden or camped in Texas during his eight years of service. This afternoon the premonition of action thrilled him like whisky; he looked about from his perch upon a keg against the rear wall and ran skilled fingers over the banjo strings, then began to pick out a catchy, foot-tickling air.

"Folks!" he said abruptly. "Goin' to sing a li'l song. Them with weak gizzards'd better hunt the air. I al'ays sing just for my own amusement but she plumb irritates me to have folks not like my singin'. I recollect I had to shoot a fella one time for lookin' over toward a burro after I got done. But 'twas only a Mex', so that was a' right. Turned out, too, he was stone deaf. But hell—yuh cain't tell by lookin' in a mule's ear how much he'll weigh.

"Goin' to sing yuh-all a li'l song about a friend o' mine that hung out up 'round Tascosa-way. She's a good song, too. I never like to sing just any ol' song; fella takes too many chances o' prosecutin' his Art, thataway. I find that the best way o' makin' sure o' singin' good songs is to make 'em up myself. This-yere 'n' runs like this—she's called 'The Ballad o' Slim Wiggin':

*"'Twere a bright an' shiny mawnin';
Ol' Millennium, she were come;
St. Pete, he were the roundup boss;
The herds was millin' some.*

*"Up the Heaven Trail come 'lopin—
Like his mind's on hefty things—
A long an' limber sad-face' gambler
On a yellin' hawss 'ith wings.*

*"Says St. Pete, 'Now, whoa there, stranger!
Le' me mira [look] at yo' brand.
Lots o' driftin' stock's got tangled
Up 'ith this-yere holy band.*

*"'We're roundin' up an' cuttin' out
An' yander rides the rep'
O' Satan's well-knowed Pitchfawk Dot
With fo' redimps for he'p.'*

*"Says the gambler, 'I'm Slim Wiggin
From up Tascosa-way.
I'm a gambler an' a maverick
I sho' would like to stay!*

*"'I'm a wonderin' if a gambler
Can wear the Crown Harp brand.
I wondered that before I died,
Choked up 'ith desert sand.*

*"'The' was me an' young Kid Louis,
With one ol' wore-out hawss.
We cut the cards to see who lived
An'—somehow, I just los'!*

*"St. Pete, he gaped at Gabriel
An' Gabe, he wunk at Pete.
Says St. Pete, 'A gambler losin'
Must've cut 'em with yo' 'feet!*

*"Well, I can't let no gamblers in.
So, fella, git yuh hence!
But—down the line the bob-wire's loose.
Yuh could easy bust that fencel"*

When he had finished, they yelled uproariously for more and would have forced a dozen and more drinks upon him. He waved them off, grinning, and shifted the banjo upon his lap. Silence fell instantly, so that a voice sounded clearly from the extreme rear of the crowd before the speaker could check himself.

"—sing like that but 'Shoutin' Shelley' Raines, the Texas Ranger! Whut's he after up here?"

Shelley swept quickly into *The Cowboy's Lament*, and again he had them breathless. But when he had done this time he rose swiftly, for over the heads of those before him he saw the deep-lined hatchet-face of Art Taylor. Seeing that, he had plunged into the drinkers still at the bar, the men who had grouped before Shelley redistributed themselves. Shelley could not find Mig' Cervantes anywhere; Ike Robey was in a corner with two grave-faced townsmen, in earnest conversation with them. Art Taylor, with Al Koenig, as usual, at his elbow, had his drink and then the pair moved toward the door. Shelley stepped out in their path, with a swift glance downward at the long-barreled Colt which hung, butt to the rear for a left-hand draw, upon his side.

They watched him come and he knew that his glance at the six-shooter had been observed. He stopped, as they had done, so that he stood perhaps six feet from them. He eyed them with head slightly upon one side, his eye squinting against the smoke of his cigarette. Silence, thick almost as the tobacco smoke that rose toward the cottonwood rafters, fell upon the barroom. Al Koenig moved his feet a trifle and his shoulders hunched tensely. His

thumbs were hooked in habitual fashion in the crossed cartridge-belts. Art Taylor merely watched Shelley narrowly.

"That's shore a mighty fancy belt yuh got, Koenig," drawled Shelley. The gunman's vest of spotted cowhide had fallen open and under the cartridge-belts showed a wide belt fastened with four silver buckles, decorated with an intricate design formed of Mexican silver coins which had been pierced and laced to the belt. "Yes, sir. A mighty fancy belt. But—ain't yuh lost one o' the *pesos* off'n it?"

Koenig stared at Shelley with a puzzled narrowing of his dark eyes. Then mechanically he glanced down at his belt and up at Shelley again:

"Why—inebbe," he replied. "But howcome yuh—"

"Then I reckon this belongs to yuh?"

From a pocket of his buckskin jacket, Shelley fished a Mexican *peso*, pierced and with frayed strands of rawhide lacing still clinging to the holes. He held it out to Koenig, who made no move to accept it, but only stared watchfully at the big, faintly smiling figure. Sensing imminent drama, the drinkers were rigid at the bar, watching, watching. Slowly, mechanically, Al Koenig's hand came up to his neckerchief and lifted it to mop his chin. In that instant Shelley's smiling calm was replaced by swift, amazed widening of his eyes.

For, upon the smooth ivory-tinted skin of Al Koenig's throat, plain as if painted there, was the blue imprint of a hand—a hand from which the third finger was conspicuously absent.

"So!" Shelley cried. "So Three Finger Joe Peel put his brand on yuh before yuh shot him—while Art Taylor, there, was holdin' him from behind!"

With a gasp—noting, perhaps, that Shelley's left hand was poised at his lips, holding the cigarette—Koenig's hands streaked for the buckhorn butts of his guns. Ike Robey, who had inched down the room until he stood behind and slightly to one side of Shelley, cried out despairingly and clawed at his own gun-butt.

But Shelley's right hand, which had been swinging loosely at his side, flipped up and forward and from the sleeve of his jacket something short and blue and thick twinkled into his fingers. The derringer roared, almost instantly roared again; was released and vanished—jerked by a strip of elastic webbing—up the sleeve again. Al Koenig collapsed with two .41 bullets through his face. But dead as he undoubtedly was, the nerves of his thumbs carried out the action the brain had begun; back came the hammers of his Colts and two bullets thudded into the floor almost at Shelley's feet.

From the saloon's rear door sounded the whip-like *whang* of a Winchester. Art Taylor came crashing down like a great tree, still tugging at his gun. Mig' Cervantes, grinning wolfishly, ran forward with carbine at his hip and stared down at the owner of the Rattlesnake.

"*Por Dios!* Me, I'm think somethin', she's go pop! I'm watch with Carlotta, here. W'en Art Taylor, she's start for to kill you, I'm cut him in two!"

Shelley stooped over Al Koenig, slipping off the great neckerchief so that the telltale print of Joe Peel's dead hand might be plainly seen by all those who gathered about the bodies. Mig' Cervantes watched them like a hawk—and all there refrained from approaching him in the rear.

Shelley straightened and the buckskin jacket parted in the front, revealing the curved butt of the Colt shoved into the waistband of his overalls. Someone, gazing mechanically that way, nudged a neighbor.

"Looky!" he whispered tensely. "There's his real gun! He ain't no mo' left-handed than I be!"

At Ike Robey's direction, the bodies were carried into a back room. Only the sheriff, Mig' Cervantes, Shelley and one Rawlins, owner of the Open Door, were permitted here.

"How'd yuh know 'twas Al Koenig killed Joe?" demanded Ike Robey.

"I hate to tell yuh," shrugged Shelley. "It'll knock holes in my rep': I never had no idee 'twas him an' Art Taylor.

I did figger that they was by no means above doin' it, but I was lookin' for two men that'd stick clost together, two men about the same size. Even when I see Art Taylor an' Koenig together an' see that they wore about the same size boot an' that Taylor took li'l steps for a man his size, I never suspected 'em.

"But this yere Mex' peso I picked up over on the Smoky, in the camp where the rustlers stayed while they was gatherin' JM cows together. Today, at the funeral, Al Koenig's vest came open an' I see that big belt o' his. Never see another like it, so I took a chanct tonight that he was in on the rustlin'. I never thought he'd raise that neckerchief an' show that he was Joe Peel's murderer, too."

"Koenig's rid quite a bit with Denton Jack." This was Rawlins, the saloon-keeper, speaking for the first time. "Him an' Taylor was talkin' together quiet, last night. I heerd him say that—about ridin' with Denton Jack."

He turned half-hesitantly to the sheriff.

"Ike, I never was no partic'lar friend o' Art Taylor's. But a fella in my line o' business has got to keep friendly-like with all sorts. I been lettin' Taylor put money an' papers in my safe. Yisterday him an' Koenig come in together an' Taylor handed me some gold in a sack—a lot. I put it in the safe. Long about midnight he come in ag'in an' asked me if he could put some bills o' sale an' things in the sack with the money. Now I'm sort o' wonderin if they *was* bills o' sale."

He turned and waddled out, to return a few moments later with a fat buckskin sack. Ike Robey opened it and cascaded gold-pieces upon the table. With the gold came a sheaf of folded pages—sheets torn from a ledger. Shelley bent over the close-written pages beside the sheriff. They were Joe Peel's notes, remarks concerning certain suspicious actions of various citizens. Near the last of them was a curt entry:

Riding in country near Dead Man's Creek met Tom Holmes with six-seven hundred cows. Holmes claimed cows—branded Circle-Cross-in-Box, Rattlesnake and Tri-

angle-Bob—bought from Art Taylor. Seemed nervous. Riding on his back-trail found dying cow with JM brand. Circle-Cross-in-Box would cover JM. But not enough evidence yet to accuse Taylor of crookedness.

"So 'twas Art Taylor bought the JM stuff—bought 'em off'n Al Koenig!" grunted Shelley.

Ike Robey was staring at the gold-pieces. He looked up swiftly at Shelley:

"I reckon this yere's the sale price, too. Now, I'm goin' to do somethin' because she's right, an' I don't give a dam' if she's legal: Shelley, yuh take that bag o' gold there an' take her back to Jim Mannin'. Tell him I say that if the's more money than his cows an' yo' time is worth, it sho' belongs to yuh. Now, I want that yuh should come an' meet some o' the re-spectable folks o' Farwell. Them an' their wives'll be mighty proud to shake yuh by the hand."

"Wives!" cried Shelley, aghast.

"Sho'! An' *daughters*. They're mighty nice folks, Shelley. Yuh'll like 'em fine."

"Well, le' me hike down to the corral an' git into my saddlebags, then. I can't be bustin' into society without a clean shirt. Yuh-all wait yere for me, Ike!"

He returned the gold-pieces to the buckskin sack, slipped it into a pocket of his jacket and went out hastily, going through the side door to avoid passing through the barroom. He walked as hurriedly as his high heels would permit to the corral and roused Rojo from a doze.

"Git around yere, yuh!" he snarled at the tall bay. "Society! We're goin' to hightail it!"

He swung into the saddle and cut through behind the houses, making a wide circuit of the town. Upon the hill-crest southwest of Farwell he reined in Rojo and looked back. The wide, whimsical mouth lifted; ironically he doffed his hat.

"Folks!" he said impressively. "This yere's shore the proudest moment o' my life. To look around an' see all these yere smilin' happy faces, some o' which is washed an' others ain't, is just plumb excrucyatin'. I don't know which to thank most, folks—Ike Robey for tryin' to git

me into this or Shelley Raines for gittin' me out! Come on, Big Boy! Rattle yo' hocks for the Diamond River!

*"Up the Heaven Trail come lopin—
Like his mind's on hefty things—
A long an' limber sad-face' gambler
On a yaller hawss 'ith wings!"*



First Blood

By James Atlee Phillips

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE to be caught before the prying eyes of 18,000 people with nothing between you and the ground but a revolving ton of Brahma bull that had nothing in view but your speedy and complete annihilation? And you armed with only a gaudy handkerchief—and it strung around your neck! *It's a mess*, thought young Birdy Greenough dismally. *It's a jam-up mess and a terrible way to treat a growing boy; it's what I get for being Shep Greenough's son.*

The night was clear and the wind was warm. Birdy twisted his long legs and squinted at the stars, but he didn't really see them. He didn't hear the low bawlings of the sleek show cattle that sloped away on all sides, either. He was lying on a bale of hay in the livestock pavilion at the Midwest Rodeo and Fat Stock Show, and he didn't see anything or hear anything, because he was fighting fear in his mind, and it wasn't even a close fight. He was scared to death.

He scratched his head and tilted the big creased hat down over his nose. A faint roar sounded through the night, like water spilling from a high place, and he knew that would be the wind-up of the trick roping. *Just one more event*, he thought, *just the calf roping, and then I'll be out there all alone except for that damned Brahma bull.* He had a vague hope that he wouldn't draw a choicely bull, or one that would be more than usually inclined to scatter the various parts of his body around the tanbark arena. But he knew that was a subterfuge of thought because there just weren't any peaceful Brahmas.

"Oh, me!" he whispered into the old black hat, and had a momentary regret that his father couldn't have been a good lawyer or doctor, instead of being Shep Green-

ough, nine times World's Champion Cowboy. That thought went quickly, however, for he was proud of the old man. He was thinking about that, staring into the big hat, when his father called to him. He jerked up on the bale, unkinked his legs and pushed the hat back.

"Ready?"

"Near about."

His father sat down next to him. "You scared?"

Birdy squinted his eyes and pinched his sunburned nose with a gloved hand. "Naw," he said, and hoped the Lord would forgive him for such a lie. "Naw, just a jag nervous."

His father grunted and lighted a cigarette. The old man's face, seamed and weathered as mahogany, was hawklike in the yellow flare of the match.

"Best be going," said Shep Greenough, the old champion, and Birdy heaved up from the comfortable bale of hay and followed him down the lane through the livestock pavilion.

Birdy was taller than his father, but other than that, they were very like each other as they went down toward the lighted Coliseum. Both of them wore tight whipcord pants and black silk shirts. The pants molded their legs and snugged down into red triple-stitched boots. Spurs jingled faintly on their heels as they went forward with that slight hitching gait which is the handwriting of the saddle. The older man limped slightly in a lack of stride that old hurts gave him, and he held one shoulder higher than the other.

Neither of them said anything until they were almost to the corrals back of the Coliseum, and Birdy could see people sitting in the lighted windows of the big building. Something like panic flowered in his head, and he could feel a damp sweat beading up in the palms of his hands.

A calf roper came bursting out of the arena on a bay horse. His trailing rope snaked along the ground behind him and a bitter rush of curses exploded from under the brim of his hat.

Shep Greenough chuckled. "Pardee must 'a' missed

bad," he said, still shaking with that dry laughter. "He won't never forget that seven-second throw I made on him, in Laramie that time."

Neither will I, thought Birdy, and shook his head. His throat felt dry. Dark forms were milling around in the corral to his right, and when one of them thundered into the fence and shook it, the boy started involuntarily. His father was looking at him, but the old man wasn't smiling.

"You ain't puttin' your feet down right," said Shep Greenough slowly. "Seems as if you might not want to make this ride." He hunched his shoulders and spat down carefully between the toes of his polished boots. "Wouldn't do nothing I didn't want to do," he went on carelessly. There was a polite overtone in his voice that made Birdy sick deep down in the belly.

"I'm nervous," the boy said again stubbornly, and stretched his neck, trying to get the tension out of it.

"Do whatever you want," Shep Greenough said, without any emotion. "If he slips on the tanbark, don't let him roll on you. If he goes fence-bustin' get that off leg free. An' if you come off him in the middle of the arena, don't move if you can't make the fence."

Birdy took a deep breath. "I'll try to rake him good, Shep," he said awkwardly. "I'll try to take the hide right off him." Then he stood there, silently, and waited for some helpful sign, some little thing, but his father's face was a wrinkled mask.

"I don't think you'll make it," said Shep Greenough suddenly and smoothly. "You're scared to death an' shakin' like a leaf." His calm words, delivered like a dictum, hit into the boy's listening face. "You just try not to get bad hurt," said the old man, "an' we'll go back to the ranch tomorrow." Then he turned and went stumping away.

Birdy stood there, staring after him, with his jaws snapped together so tightly they began to ache. When Shep had vanished around the corner of the corral, the boy pulled his hat down hard, and walked into the contestants' room. The big chart said he was up seventh, and he ducked out of the little office and went shoulder-

ing through the crowd of cowboys to the chutes.

There were more people in the Coliseum than he had ever seen in one place before. As he climbed up on the fence, he looked around at the sea of people and felt the tightness growing down under his belt buckle.

Everybody in Texas must be here, he thought, listening to the crowd and eying the heavy skeins of blue smoke that drifted up into the battery of lights over the arena. A prickling rash of fury was in his mind at what his father had said to him, and as the moments went by, that dull rage overpowered the tightness in his neck and stomach, so that he did not even see the first riders come out. *He had no call to low-rate me like that*, thought Birdy to himself. *After all, I never rode the Brahmas before. It ain't like I was an old hand.*

The boy sat there fuming as the announcer's voice boomed out of the speakers clustered up among the lights, announcing the rider, and then, if he made a successful trip, leading the applause and making some reference to the rider himself.

The fifth rider exploded out of the near chute on a whirling dun dervish and got three good jumps in before he went down. *One more*, thought Birdy, hunched on the fence, and looked down at his gloved hands. A loud outcry from the crowd lifted his head. The Brahma had whirled and was bearing down on the man he had just thrown.

The man seemed to be caught in an invisible morass; his booted legs moved, but he ran with agonizing slowness, and a note of hysteria crept into the heavy wail that rose from the crowd.

The animal was shaking its heavy head savagely, and the bell strapped on its flanks was clanking as it charged. When it overtook the rider and threw its speeding force into his retreating back, he seemed to jump into the air suddenly, like a tossed doll.

A pickup man charged into the arena, and the Brahma went on, legs winging out, toward the other end of the oval Coliseum. A varicolored wave of climbing cowboys

took the fence ahead of the bull with one concerted leap, and it thundered headlong into the barrier after them. Its front legs got over, and the huge body hung there for a second, with the crowd holding a painful silence. Then the bull slumped back into the arena, and the pickup man hazed it out through the other entrance.

Stretcher-bearers came trotting out and lifted the fallen cowboy. One more, thought Birdy, and I'm it.

The man sitting next to him, a half-breed in an orange shirt, shook his head and whispered softly. "He must 'a' got his back broken," he said, and made a wry face.

Birdy jumped to the ground without answering, and went over the soft tanbark toward the far chute. The sixth contestant was already in the arena. The crowd roared hugely, and Birdy knew that the ride had ended quickly.

Through the bars of the chute he could see the shadowy mass of his Brahma, and he knew, even as he approached, that he had drawn a big one.

The address system up in the lights rasped on, and the announcer's voice came booming out of it. "Birdy Greenough," the announcer said, "coming out of Chute Three."

The boy let himself down into the chute. As he went down, slowly and cautiously, he wondered where Shep was, and whether he was watching. Once the Brahma lunged up and almost knocked him loose, but he pulled away and waited until the handlers on the ground had the big animal set again. Then Birdy eased down once more and felt his weight settle behind the big hump on its back.

The flank bell bonged out as the Brahma kicked at it viciously, and Birdy could hear an impatient murmur out in the crowd as he took the rope in his left hand. The loose skin on the animal's back shifted under him, and he hitched up toward the hump again, jerking his hat down firmly.

The men outside the chute were looking in through the slats. Their faces were inquiring and tense.

Birdy was trembling, and he took a deep breath. "All right," he said in a tight voice, "turn this scoundrel out."

The walls of the chute swung away on both sides and, for a fleeting second, he was there in plain sight of the crowd, a thin boy astride a big wedge-shaped animal. Someone, somewhere, laughed, a crackling sound, and Birdy jammed his spurs into the sloping sides. That was all that was necessary. The black Brahma lunged, hit once stiff-legged, and Birdy felt the big flanks go up, high and sideways. He was in the air and then down again, front end first, with a jar that threw him against the heavy hump and put a sharp pain in his groin.

Then the Brahma swapped ends, and the lights swam by Birdy's eyes. He remembered to keep his spurs working along the big beast's sides, and even when he lost his hat at an unexpected turning, he kept his free hand swinging.

He was nearly to the rail, and when the Brahma crashed down, the huge body lifting and slamming stiff-legged to the ground, Birdy saw strange lights exploding before his eyes, and once he thought his bobbing head had been popped right off his neck.

Not long now, he thought confusedly, and rattled the arching ribs under him with a heavy kick, one for Shep. The maddened brute began to whirl, and that was hardest of all, for the boy had to keep leaning inward, and he didn't have any idea when the huge bundle of fury between his legs would reverse and start the other way.

I sure wish I knew this bull's plans, thought Birdy, and he kept getting dizzier and dizzier from the sunfishing until the bull lurched sideways out of a spin and sent him overboard.

The landing wasn't bad. Birdy took it on one shoulder and froze to the ground. When nothing happened, he relaxed a little and turned his head slightly. The bull had rushed around the far end of the arena and was bearing down on him.

As he lay there, plastered to the ground and unprotected, Birdy thought bitterly that this was where the unfair part came in, but he didn't move as the bull stormed over him and shied away at the last minute. He saw the

cloven hoofs strike by his head and pound away again, and he lay watching as the wave of cowboys rolled back upon the fence before the bull's coming.

Lying there, he took stock of himself. His groin ached dully, and his face smarted where the oiled sawdust of the arena floor had ground into it, but that seemed to be the extent of his injuries. As the pickup man hazed the bull out of the entrance, the boy got up stiffly and limped toward the fence, slapping at his tight pants. He was angry because the bull had thrown him after he had done so well at first, and it took him about ten steps to realize that the crowd was one bellowing flood of noise.

The knowledge startled him and he stopped, a thin bareheaded boy in a dark silk shirt, just off the center of the arena, with his head lifted into all the noise. The cowboys along the fence began to shout at him, someone called out "Champ!" in a laughing way, and the speakers up above boomed out again.

"The last ride," chuckled the announcer's voice, "and the best ride of the night, was Birdy Greenough, son of Shep Greenough, who was for many years the World's Best All-Around Cowboy."

A big flurry of clapping went up at that, and Birdy ducked his head and started toward the gate, stopping only once to pick up his hat.

"I guess the boy intended to ride right through to our matinee tomorrow," went on the amused announcer, and another great wave of laughter rolled down from the crowd and lapped over Birdy, hurrying along toward the gate.

Just before he got there, a formally dressed man in a derby swung into the arena on a gleaming chestnut show horse, and Birdy veered out of his way. The spirited horse broke its gait, and the man in the derby looked back angrily, but Birdy didn't mind. He felt warm inside and he forgot all about his bruises.

When he stopped to ask a cowboy about the ride, the puncher spat out an amber stream and laughed.

"Hell, yes," he said. "You rode right through the bell

an' then got in about two-three more rides for good measure. Pickup man couldn't get near you."

Birdy knocked the sawdust out of his hat and grinned up at the puncher. "I never heard that bell a-tall," he said solemnly, and the puncher laughed and spat again. Then Birdy went down the worn brick lane to find Shep.

He found him in the tack room, down at the far end of the trick riders' stable. Old Shep was standing in the center of the room, his big hat pushed far back on the silvered hair, and he was counting a bundle of green bills. The money went whispering through his corded fingers easily, and just as Birdy stepped up on the wood floor of the room, Shep said, "Two hunnert, even," in a satisfied tone, and shoved the money into his shirt pocket.

The boy stood back of him, just inside the door, and the light from the naked bulb lanced down across his drawn face. "Well, you was wrong about it," he said angrily. "I rode him."

Shep Greenough sucked softly through his teeth and buttoned the pocket flap on his black shirt. "Yes," he said, not turning around, "you damn' near rode him out of the park."

Birdy shifted and his boot heels scraped on the plank floor. "He won't be the last one, neither," he said.

The old man said nothing, and a horse in one of the stalls outside the door whinnied out its breath.

Birdy tried again. "I found out something," he said. "Along about that third jump, I found out the bull was scared, too."

Shep Greenough laughed big and solidly at that. The sound of his mirth rollicked through the little room and turned him around to face his son. "Still riled about that rawhidin' I gave you, hunh?" Shep rubbed his chin. "Well, I'll tell you something: Twenty-four years ago, on a night like this, I was just about to take my first ride, same as you tonight, and I was plumb discouraged about it. That night Sam Hildreth come up and cussed me so bad I jest forgot to be scared."

The old man swept off his hat and scratched his silver

thatch with a gnarled hand. "Couldn't hardly wait to get my ride in," he went on, "so's I could kick the whey out of Sam. Matter of fact, he like to beat the tar out of me in sheer self-defense, but I don't guess I ever would have topped that big critter if Sam hadn't of prodded me the way he did."

Birdy let his breath out slowly, and the tension eased out of him. "That the way it was?"

Shep nodded and put his hat back on. "That's the way it was. I figured it was about time to separate the men from the boys, and I had a couple hundred dollars bet that you was one of the men."

Birdy's tanned face twitched and a smile lapped across it from ear to ear. The two of them moved out of the room and started walking down the worn brick lane toward the Stockyards Hotel, just outside the grounds. When they passed by the bale of hay, Birdy smiled again in the darkness and spatted a huge shorthorn on the rump with his glove. The chunky animal lunged forward in its stall and snorted wildly. Strains of music from the merry-go-round over on the midway floated in around the long rows of patiently breathing cattle.

"You know," said Birdy suddenly and seriously, "I wasn't up close enough to that hump, and, once there, he like to got me."

The old man nodded. "You got to watch that," he said thoughtfully and softly, careful not to break in on the boy's new-found importance. "You sure got to watch that." Then the two Brahma riders walked on in silence toward the radiance over the streets ahead.



Watchdog of Lonesome Creek

By Harry Sinclair Drago

THROUGH THE SALOON WINDOW the Deadwood Kid saw Hexstall ride by. The sheriff was bundled up in a sheepskin-lined coat and a pair of bearskin chaps. The day was gray, and a raw cold wind was sweeping down from the snow-capped peaks of the Tetons. Still, the Kid figured, a man wouldn't bundle up that way unless he was going some distance.

He was interested, but there was nothing in his manner to suggest it as he drifted out of the Gem and casually flipped a cigarette into shape. Lounging against one of the posts that supported the wooden awning, he could see up and down the length of the main street of Indian Wells. This part of Wyoming had never seen him before. As for the town itself, he found it no different than a hundred others he had known.

Hexstall had reached the edge of town. Simply by turning his head an inch or two the Kid could follow his progress. If his manner was that of a man with nothing on his mind, it did not extend to his round button eyes. They were sharp with a ratlike alertness. When he saw Hexstall pull his pony into a lope and strike off across the rolling sagebrush plain to the north, he could not forego a little grunt of satisfaction. This was a break he had not counted on. It was a few minutes after one now. Obviously the sheriff had had his dinner and was now off on some errand that would keep him out of town for an hour or two.

"That'll be a lot more than I'll need," the Kid told himself.

His intentions had been entirely innocent when he rode into Indian Wells the previous day. He had left Montana

in a hurry, "shipping his trunk ahead of him," as the saying went. The Robbers' Roost country, down in San Juan County, Utah, was his destination, where he was confident of finding old cronies. He knew he had no time to waste if he was to take the short cut through the Tetons. Any day now snow might close the passes.

Believing himself well ahead of the law, and badly in need of information to get him through the wild tangle of mountains and canyons now looming ahead, he had ridden into Indian Wells, intending only to remain an hour or two. No hand had been raised against him; but he had not gone on. His roving eyes had fastened on the old-fashioned, unprotected bank that stood on the corner opposite, and his plans had changed in an instant.

This would be something to talk about around the campfires down in the land of the painted bluffs as he lazied away the long winter. He had hoisted banks before. This one didn't figure to give him any trouble. His horse stood at the rack in front of the little frame building. It had been there for an hour, ready against his moment of need. Five minutes after he stepped inside the place, he'd be out and making for the hills.

Standing there, waiting, he took a last drag at his cigarette. With thumb and forefinger he snapped it halfway across the street. Now, he decided, giving his gun-belt a little hitch.

His step was slow, shuffling as he crossed the road. At the door, he met a man coming out. The Kid jerked an impersonal nod and stepped inside the bank, pausing to close the door behind him.

A counter ran cross-wise of the room. Behind it stood the safe. To reach it, the cashier had to step through an iron grating. The grating door stood wide open now.

The Kid grinned as he ambled up to the counter, still unhurried, still just a tousle-headed, slightly puzzled puncher who had drifted into Indian Wells from some distant range. The middle-aged cashier glanced at him without suspicion. "Good afternoon—"

It was as far as he got. In less time than it took him to draw in his breath, he saw Deadwood's affability fade. The round button eyes boring into him were suddenly murderous, merciless. Too late, the cashier realized how matters stood. Transfixed, the blood drained away from his sagging cheeks, he stared at the gun the Kid poked at him.

"No tricks—or I'll blow you wide open!"

The cashier nodded.

The Kid pulled out a folded canvas bag and slapped it down on the counter. "Get over to the safe and fill this up in a hurry," he ordered. "Keep your lip buttoned if anybody comes in. I ain't fooling, Mister."

The cashier gulped that he understood. He went to the safe. His hands shook as he filled the sack. Even so, it did not take him long. No one came in.

"Pull the draw-string tight, and knot it," the Kid told him.

The man obliged.

"Now start reaching for the ceiling." Deadwood grabbed the money-bag and started backing toward the door. "You've played it smart so far, Mister," he said. "Don't make a mistake now."

The cashier's mouth drew a little tighter. On the shelf beneath the counter lay a loaded sawed-off shotgun, kept there for just such an emergency as this.

The Kid read the thought racing through the other's mind. He was at the door now. With his left hand, he reached behind him to trip the latch. The bag got in his way and he had to half turn around to get the door open. In the second that his attention was diverted, he felt rather than saw the cashier's hands dart to the shotgun.

He was ready for him, with time to spare. His beady button eyes glittered in his wolfish face. Calmly, deliberately, and with less mercy than he would have shown a mad dog, he fired. The shotgun clattered to the floor as the cashier pitched forward across the counter.

The shot had been heard. Men began to pop out of

doors all along the street. They were not slow to understand what had happened. But the Kid had reached his horse. With a leaden hail whining about his ears, he spurred his big gray gelding across a vacant lot and reached a side street. Glancing back, he emptied his gun to discourage pursuit, and was gone.

Two days later, without having caught sight of the Kid, Dan Hexstall warmed himself at old Teton Gant's fire. This cabin on the headwaters of Lonesome Creek was a favorite rendezvous of his. Some of his possemen having been there the day before, he didn't have to explain why he was abroad in such weather as this; it had been snowing for 36 hours.

"I don't believe he got through," Hexstall said. "According to the questions he'd been asking, he was headed somewhere down along the Colorado. Crazy Woman Pass was the only way open to him. Sam Rathbun had a bunch organized and ready to ride in ten minutes after the bank was stuck up. I thought he used his head in making a beeline for the pass instead of trying to pick up a trail. I know they got there ahead of their man."

"Are you sure he ain't headin' east on you?" Teton asked. No one knew this country better than he. "A man could drift down through that Sweetwater country this time o' the year."

"I've got it pretty well blocked off, Teton. If you ask me, he's holed up somewhere this side of the divide."

By now he knew the identity of the man he sought. The knowledge only added to his sense of responsibility.

"I missed a trick in not spotting him upon sight. A good man killed, and eight thousand dollars gone." He shook his head soberly. "I blame myself. I should have been there."

"Day in the mornin'!" old Teton protested impatiently. "No reason for you to feel that way. A peace-officer can't be expected to know every blackleg and killer driftin' through this country. The sheriff never lived that didn't

miss out once in awhile. I know I did. It never stopped me from thinkin' I was doin' a purty good job of bringin' the law to this part of Wyomin'."

"The record's there to prove that," Hexstall said. "I know I'm young, but I've never been foolish enough to think I rated with you."

He wasn't saying more than he meant. Twenty years ago this part of Wyoming had been overrun with outlaws. Hexstall had grown up on tales of Teton Gant's successful war on them.

"I wish you were siding me on this job," he remarked. "I know your rheumatism has got your arms pretty well starched, but there isn't anything wrong with your head."

"Shucks!" old Teton exclaimed disparagingly, though secretly he was as pleased as Puck, "you'd ride me into the ground. I've been on the shelf a long time, Dan."

"I don't know about that," Hexstall replied. "Rustlers and horse thieves give this Lonesome Creek country a wide berth, and they used to think they owned it until you started this little spread."

Gant laughed. "Mebbe this is where I belong. Mebbe I'll be more help to you if I stay right here in the hills. Anyways, I'm winter feedin' now and I couldn't leave my stock. If this Deadwood Kid is hidin' out somewhere between my place and the divide, I may git wind of him."

"If you do, you get word to me," Hexstall advised. "Dop't try to take him alone. He's a killer, Teton."

"I never try to bite off more'n I can chew," Gant assured him.

When Hexstall was ready to leave, Teton stepped outside with him and had a look at the weather.

"Snow's about over," he observed. "Goin' to turn right cold." He tried the snow with his boot. "Sittin' up a crust already. You better keep movin' right along if you're goin' as far as the Diamond S tonight. A horse will find the goin' purty tough, come dark."

"Thirty miles," Hexstall said as he swung up. "I'll make it all right."

The Deadwood Kid had been watching the cabin for hours. He saw the sheriff leave. He could read the weather as well as Teton Gant. The Kid knew he had to reach cover or freeze to death. He was equally aware that he had to reach it before the snow stopped falling, or leave a trail that a child could follow.

Before Hexstall was well out of sight, the Kid began moving down through the scrub timber. Half an hour later he pulled up with only a tangle of lodgepole pines between him and Gant's place. He took in every detail—the cabin, the barn, the empty pole corrals and the snow-shrouded haystack. In front of the house, a meadow fell away to creek. Down there he could see Gant's steers huddled in the lee of the protecting bluffs.

The Kid knew he had only an old man to face, but the hunt for him was on, and he was apt to be picked off as soon as he showed his face. It made him cautious. He told himself he'd be all right if he could reach the barn. He could wait there until night fell before going up to the cabin.

But he could find no way of reaching the barn without exposing himself to view. It was fully 100 yards away.

"The old coot would spot me the second I stepped out of the trees if he happened to be looking this way," he muttered. Waiting there, the cold eating into him, he reached a decision. "I'm going to chance it."

Leading his horse, he broke cover and moved off to his right until he had the barn between him and the house. A sigh of relief escaped him. If he had been seen, there was no evidence of it.

It didn't take him long to reach the rear of the barn. Safety ended here, for the door was on the side that faced the kitchen. He hesitated a moment, nerves tense, and then turned the corner. He was prepared for a shot, or, failing that, a peremptory command to freeze in his tracks and start reaching. But his luck held. Presently, he was at the door. It yielded to his touch. The barn itself might be a trap. He realized it as he stood silhouetted in the

opening, but he dared not hold back now.

As he stepped inside, the friendly nickering of a horse came to him through the gloom. Reassured, the Kid led his own animal into the barn and pushed the door to.

It was cold even here. Not knowing how long he would have to wait, he put the gelding into the stall with Gant's horse and huddled in between them, warming his hands on their bellies. A glance told him that the evening chores had not been done. He knew the old man would be out sooner or later. The Kid had to be satisfied with that.

An hour passed. Through a dirty square of glass, he saw that it had stopped snowing. It didn't matter; he knew his tracks had been obliterated. Stars were beginning to glitter in the frosty sky.

"What's keeping the old fool?" he growled. "He ought to be getting out here soon."

He couldn't see the house from where he stood, but when a buttery yellow daub of light fell across the snow, he knew a lamp had been lit in the kitchen. A few minutes later, he heard the crunching of boots on snow crust.

It was Gant, a lantern in his hand. His breath steaming, he stepped into the barn and hung the lantern on a nail over the feed-box. He was reaching for the oat pan when the Kid announced his presence.

"Hold it," he said. "You got company, Mister."

Teton straightened slowly. His surprise was complete, but he had not lost his wits. He knew who this was. "Wal," he drawled. "I can stand a little company—of the right sort—"

"No gab!" the Kid snapped. "You got a gun on you?"

"No—"

"Okay. Take care of these horses. We'll go up to the house then. I'll take charge of that sack on my saddle."

Gant cursed himself for walking into this jack-pot. "Somethin' always goes wrong when I sit down and try to write a letter," he muttered to himself.

"Stop that growling and get busy," the Kid whipped

out.

"I'll feel more comfortable if you'll put that gun back in the leather," Teton told him. "I've made my mistake; I won't make a second one. Hexstall warned me to be on the lookout for you."

"Oh, he did," the Kid observed suspiciously. "When will he be back?"

"Wal, he won't be back until some of this snow goes off. You won't be gittin' very far either."

"Don't worry about me, I'm sticking right here with you, Grandpa. Do what you're told to do and you won't get hurt."

When they returned to the two-room cabin Deadwood gave the place a thorough going-over. Sure that he had not left a loose gun lying around somewhere, he emptied Teton's rifle and .44's and tossed them up on the loose boards that had been laid across the beams to make an attic storeroom.

After what he had been through, the promise of a warm bed and hot food took the edge off his sullenness. But not for long. He watched Gant like a hawk. He didn't know anything about him, and he didn't bother to find out. But fear had sharpened instincts in him, as in any animal at bay, and although he could not put his finger on anything, some sixth sense repeatedly warned him that Teton was not the innocent old-timer he appeared.

Gant pretended not to notice, but he couldn't escape the boring scrutiny of those round, button eyes. Every move he made was under suspicion, and though he had been in some tight places in his time, he knew he had never been in greater danger than now, cooped up here with a mad dog.

Thought of Hexstall crossed his mind. He knew Dan would come again. The sheriff was his hope, but he caught himself dreading Hexstall's return. *He'll be cut down before he ever gets out of the saddle*, he brooded as he sat by the fire after supper.

In the corner the Kid lay stretched out comfortably on

Teton's bunk, his eyes as alert as ever. He broke a long silence with a question. "You know this country?"

"Purty well."

"Can I get over the divide when some of this snow goes off?"

"Not before spring. The passes are—"

"I didn't say anything about the passes," the Kid snapped. "I said get over the divide—skyline it."

Gant shook his head. The truth was better than anything he could invent. "There's places where a man might try, all right. I don't figger he'd ever make it—leastwise, a stranger. He'd be sure to git himself lost. If a slide didn't git him, he'd wander around up there until he froze or starved to death. You better try some other way."

"There ain't no other way for me," the Kid growled. "Don't try to sell me anything. What's the best place to try?"

"Up White-tail and across Washakie Rim. I could kinda draw you a map—"

"I won't need a map," Deadwood said flatly. "You'll go with me."

Teton popped out of his chair and whirled on him fiercely. "Why, you dang idiot, are you crazy? You don't know what that country's like this time o' the year! We'll—all right," he subsided. "They'll find our bones up there next summer."

The Kid bound him hand and foot when it was time to turn in for the night. Teton protested vehemently at this indignity.

"Don't waste your breath," the Kid admonished. "I ain't taking no chances with you."

During the night the temperature fell to 25 below.

Teton's face was cherry red with cold when he hurried in from feeding the horses in the morning. "Won't be anybody stirrin' abroad much today," he declared. "If there's no objections, I'll go down to the creek now and spread some hay for my cows."

"All right," the Kid agreed. "I'll be watching from the

door."

The cold held all that day and the next. The Kid was at the window a hundred times, scanning the country in every direction. It was a white waste in which nothing moved. Then, with a suddenness frequent in that country, the weather changed, and they awoke on the third morning to hear water dripping from the eaves.

"Chinook," Teton said.

"Yeah," the Kid agreed. This was what he had been hoping for.

By noon the snow was going off as though by magic. Even the deep drifts shrank and in places the brown earth began to show again.

"Tomorrow," the Kid said at suppertime. "You get some grub ready."

But during the night the weather changed again, and when they rolled out of their blankets at daylight it was to find a new storm driving down from the northwest.

The Kid cursed his luck. He knew he should have gone yesterday. "This may be just a squall," he growled. "If it clears off by noon, we'll pull out."

By eleven o'clock the Kid knew he had called the turn. "We can get ready," he said.

Teton was at the window. He continued to stand there.

"I said get ready!" the Kid whipped out.

"Come here—" Gant told him.

A quarter of a mile away three horsemen had topped a low swell and were heading toward the cabin. Teton recognized Hexstall's horse.

The Kid knew it was too late for flight. But he was equal to the situation, barking orders at Teton and gathering up his gear. The makeshift attic was the only possible place of concealment. Standing on a chair, he stowed his stuff away on the boards.

"Get this straight!" he said. "I'll be up there with my gun, covering you every second they're here. Just one slip out of you will be your finish. Don't leave this room. Is that plain?"

Teton nodded. "You better git up there. They'll be here in a minute."

Hexstall had two Diamond S punchers with him. The men waited outside as he stepped in.

"I'll just stop a minute," Hexstall said. "Zack and Curly are going up to the buttes to turn back the stuff that drifted up that way. I thought I'd ride up there with them and have a look around. Here's a newspaper for you."

"Thanks," Teton murmured, wondering if the next second would bring a shot that would drop him in his tracks.

Hexstall glanced at him sharply. He fancied he caught something in the air here that was strange. He tried another question.

"You haven't seen anything of the Kid?"

"No," was the short answer, friendly enough for a stranger's ears but certainly not what Hexstall had come to expect from the old man. Gant was in the habit of expressing himself at length, and he looked a man in the eye when he spoke. This morning his glance was always somewhere else.

Hexstall's curiosity began to grow by leaps and bounds until it was an effort for him to appear casual and unsuspecting.

The coffee pot sat on the table. There was some coffee in it, but it was cold. Hexstall looked into the pot.

"Smells good," he said, reaching for a cup and taking a chair. He was stalling now, unwilling to risk a question but determined not to leave until he knew what was wrong.

Across the table Gant pretended to peruse the paper Dan had brought. Teton knew the coffee was cold—unpalatable. It told him a lot. He was far too canny to glance in the sheriff's direction. He knew the Kid was watching.

"Wal, that's too bad," he exclaimed a moment later, peering a little closer at his newspaper. He believed he had found a way of telling Dan what he wanted him to know, if the sheriff could just put two and two together. "Another old-timer gone—"

"What?" Hexstall queried.

"Teton Gant—he's passed away, I see," was the amazing answer.

Dan had difficulty in holding his eyes on his cup. "Yeh—" he murmured warily, wondering what the old man's purpose was.

"Well-known sheriff of frontier days rides his last trail," Teton quoted the imaginary headline. He pretended to read on for a moment and then put down the paper. "He smelled a lot of gun-smoke in his time," he said soberly. He shook his head, as though he found the news a little overwhelming. "He could have caught this Deadwood Kid for you, Dan. He always claimed the outlaw never lived that he couldn't outsmart."

Hexstall's thoughts were racing. He knew Teton was in dead earnest about something. Just beneath the surface, he could feel the tenseness that gripped the man. But why didn't he speak out if he had something on his mind? Dan found an answer that sent a cold chill down his spine. Were other ears than his own hearing what Gant was saying?

Hexstall knew he had to make conversation—say something.

"I guess Gant was all they say he was." His tone was deliberately disparaging. "But times change—"

"You young bucks think they do!" Teton flared up sharply. Hexstall couldn't have given him a better lead. "You might git further if you took a leaf out of his book and got off by yoreself somewheres and did more thinkin' and less ridin'."

Hexstall thought he caught the hidden message in Teton's retort. It confirmed what he was thinking.

"It might be a good idea at that," he declared after a moment's consideration. "My way doesn't seem to get me anywhere. Maybe something will turn up today."

He could not be sure that he read between the lines correctly. All he could do was play his hunch. It left him no choice about going, though he was certain that things

were desperately wrong here. As he hesitated, one of the Diamond S men called out to him. "Yuh comin'? We got a long piece to go!"

Hexstall picked up his gloves. "Well, take care of yourself," he said.

"I always have," Teton replied. "You won't be back this way before tomorrow if yo're goin' to the buttes."

Hexstall read a question in the words. He framed an answer that he thought Teton would understand.

"I may not go quite that far."

The Kid heard them ride away. He lowered himself into the room when they had been gone a few minutes.

"You played that all right, Gran'pa. Keep on using your head like that and we won't have no trouble." From the window he watched the receding riders. "That Hexstall thinks he's hot stuff," he muttered. "You kinda told him off."

"Yeh," Teton agreed, "you meet a lot of young bucks these days that ain't as smart as they figger."

The Kid whipped around, ready to make something of the remark if there was anything personal in it. He caught Teton in the act of tossing the newspaper into the fire.

"Wait a minute!" he said, grabbing Gant's wrist. "I'll have a look at that paper before you burn it up. I want to read what they're saying about me. What's the idea, anyhow?"

"We oughta be startin', Kid. We shouldn't be wastin' a minute. No tellin' when Hexstall will be back—." Teton was talking fast now. He knew he had to. The one thing in the world he didn't want Deadwood to do was to start pouring over that paper.

"Forget it!" the Kid growled. "I ain't stirring out of here till I'm sure they've gone. Make some coffee. That'll be time enough to start moving." He did not make the mistake of holding the paper in his hands.

Teton watched him spread it out on the table. He knew he had only a few seconds of grace left him. He was confident that Hexstall would take care of his end. But he

had to stall—give Dan a chance to get back.

"Huh," the Kid grunted. "I'm right here on the front page."

"Yo're makin' a mistake," Teton persisted. "Take the paper with you. You can read it tonight—"

"Do what I told you!" the Kid growled his annoyance.

Gant filled the pot and put it on the fire. His eyes were everywhere, searching for a weapon—a club—anything. His blood ran cold as he saw the Kid's glance run over the rest of the page.

"Say, where's that junk you was reading to Hexstall about the old bird? I don't see it." Another glance, and suspicion began to tear through him. Suddenly his button eyes were boring into Gant. "Where is it?" he cried.

Teton did not attempt a reply. He knew this was the finish.

Fear and rage chased each other across Deadwood's face and left it a snarling mask. A tigerish bounce brought him to his feet. Kicking a chair out of the way, he rushed to the shelf where the clock ticked cheerfully. Teton kept his old letters behind the clock. A glance at them told the Kid the truth. He knew he had been tricked—sold out—that the cabin was now a death trap for him.

"You double-crossing rat, you'll never tip Hexstall off a second time!" His hand slapped his holster. "I'll settle your hash for keeps!"

A gun coughed its flat message. The Kid whipped around on his heels as its hot breath burned across his hand. Blindly, he slapped shot after shot at the shattered window.

Dan—Teton thought. He had his opportunity now. Snatching up a platter, he brought it down on the Kid's head with such force that the heavy dish broke in two. Deadwood dropped as though he had been felled with an ax.

Gant was standing over him when Hexstall hurried in.

"That was drawing it pretty fine," Dan said, bending down to handcuff his prisoner.

"Yeh—" Teton acknowledged, with a sigh of relief. "I

figgered I'd be able to give you a little more time, but he sorta jumped the gun." He looked down at the Kid. "I'm sorry I had to do that."

"You didn't hurt him much—"

"I wasn't thinkin' of his feelin's," Gant grumbled. "I owed him that. I didn't mind bein' gun-bossed around here, but it got a little personal when he insisted on truss-in' me up every night."

"Then what are you stewing about?"

"The platter. It happens to be the only one I got."

With Bated Breath

By Ross Santee

I DIDN'T want any trouble. The girl didn't mean anything to either of us. I had only danced with her twice. Mason had been in the valley a year. I only knew him by sight. When Mason told me to lay off I thought the man was joking until I saw his face.

The thing had happened so quick it was hard to get it all straight. There was only room in the schoolhouse for six couples to dance. There was a fire going outside the door. There were probably a dozen punchers around the fire when Mason jumped me out.

No one had ever rode me before. I didn't know what to do. When I tried to pass it off as a joke it only made things worse. I was 19 years old an' husky but I'd never been in a fight. I could feel myself shaking all over.

I'd never felt so helpless before in my life. When he cussed me I started to bawl. I was turning to walk away from the fire when he slapped me across the mouth. Some of the punchers were snickering. Mason was snickering too. All I could see was Mason's face. I knew I was playing into his hands when I swung at him but I couldn't stand it no longer.

It wasn't until I was halfway back to the ranch that things began to get clear. Mason had said he would kill me the next time we met up. It was funny how I could remember that when everything else was so hazy but the words seemed to burn in my head.

It was breaking light when I stopped at Oak Creek. I felt sick all over. It was all I could do to get down from my horse but I knew the cold water would help. I didn't feel anything during the fight. Now I could hardly walk.

We had evidently rolled into the fire. I could see that my clothes had been burned. Two 30-30 shells in my

pocket were bent. Then I remembered he had given me the boots the last time I was down. A puncher had helped me onto my horse, I didn't know who he was. That was after Mason had said he would kill me the next time we met up.

I knew I couldn't go through with a gun fight. If I stayed that's what it meant. I'd seen Carter kill Johnson when I was a kid. The thought of it still made me sick. I didn't want any trouble. There was nothing to do but pull out.

I told the Ole Man what had happened when I got into the ranch. I told him I was leaving until the thing blowed over. He had taken me in when the folks died. I'd been with him since I was a kid but I wouldn't have known his voice.

"So you figger on leaving the valley until the thing blows over?" His voice cut like a knife. "Well, you might as well figger on leaving for good. If Mason don't run you off when you come back somebody else probably will."

The Ole Man avoided me all that day. At supper he didn't speak. In the evenings we always set and talked for a spell. For the first time since I had lived with him the Ole Man went to bed without a word to me.

I couldn't sleep. It was the worst night I ever put in. I knew I'd let the Ole Man down. That was the thing that hurt. I didn't want to leave the valley. I couldn't go through with a gun fight. Nothing seemed to make sense.

I couldn't keep Carter and Johnson out of my head. No matter how hard I tried. I could see the thing all over as if it had happened that day—the way Johnson looked when Carter shot him down, the look in Carter's face as he stood over him an' pumped shell after shell into Johnson as he lay on the ground. But the thing that bothered me most of all was the way the Ole Man looked at me. I'd let the Ole Man down.

The Ole Man had given me an ole .45 six-shooter years before that I always kept in my bed. I never had packed the thing. By the half-light from window I cleaned an' oiled the gun. Then I cleaned my 30-30 an' tiptoed out of the house. When I wrangled the ponies that morning I

saddled the best horse in my string. We were supposed to go to the U Bar that day an' get some of our cattle they'd gathered. It was the outfit where Mason worked. I figgered I might as well get it over with as long as it had to be.

The Ole Man had breakfast ready when I came into the house. We didn't speak all through the meal. It wasn't until he had caught up his horse that I said I was going with him. His face was always hard as flint. But when he spoke it was the voice I'd always known.

"I won't ask you to go today," he says. "You know Mason is working there. But I knew you wouldn't run away, Johnny Boy; you do belong in the valley, son."

When I said I figgered on going along the Ole Man went into the house an' got his 30-30. I took a last look at the ranch after we swung up. I didn't figger to see it again.

We were within a mile of the U Bar camp when the Ole Man pulled up his horse. "I wish I could take this off your hands—I wish I could," he says. His voice was quiet an' gentle. "Keep cool an' don't get excited, no matter what Mason says. Don't pull your gun till you're ready to shoot—when you pull it, come shootin', son. Get a slug into Mason's belly, don't think of anything else. If Mason pulls any kind of a crooked move I'll kill him myself."

I could only nod my head.

The U Bar cook was in camp alone. Dinner was almost ready. He said the outfit was branding out at a corral just up the canyon. We didn't ride 200 yards till we met them coming in.

Mason was riding a big black horse. He was coming at a gallop. At sight of us he tried to pull the big black up but the horse fought for his head. He was still fighting for his head when he passed us an' Mason yelled "Hello." Me an' the Ole Man nodded, then Mason yelled "Hello" again, as if we hadn't heard him.

When he finally pulled the big horse down we followed him into camp. I could see the butt of his six-shooter underneath his bat-winged chaps. The scabbard was built into the leggin's where it was protected by the flap. It was a common way of packing a gun when a man was on a

horse. A man could reach it quick. The flap protected it from the heavy brush. An' there was another advantage: it couldn't be seen from the front. When Mason dismounted from his horse he took his leggin's off an' he pitched the leggin's, gun and all, on the ground just out of camp. The gesture was obviously peaceful. He knew we'd seen the gun.

We rode to the other side of the camp. When the Ole Man got down from his horse he pulled his 30-30 from the scabbard an' leaned it against a tree. The Ole Man parked himself on his heels right beside the gun. He got out his pipe an' filled it, then he told me to go an' eat. I sat beside the Old Man after I filled my plate. When I finished I put my things in the round-up pan. Then I parked beside the rifle while the Ole Man got his bait.

There was the usual round-up talk that goes with a meal in camp. Tom Nash, the foreman, told the Ole Man they had gathered 30 head of our stuff. The Ole Man spoke of a U Bar saddle horse that he had seen not over a week before that was running with the bunch.

One of the men attempted a joke. It was a pretty feeble effort. Bill Jones, who was just my age, laughed so loud that several of the punchers turned an' looked at him. Bill's face turned scarlet then. Nothing about the meal seemed real to me. I could feel the Ole Man's presence above everything else in camp.

I was conscious of trifling things I wouldn't have noticed before. The cook had shaved that morning. I counted three little cuts on his cheek. There was a little mole on Dick Smith's right hand. Dick had often stayed all night at the ranch. I'd never seen it before. Mason avoided me with his eyes. His face was the color of ashes. He didn't speak all through the meal. I tried to keep Carter an' Johnson out of my head. I kept looking at his belt buckle, thinking of what the Ole Man had said. "Get a slug into his belly. Don't think of anything else." I wondered if I could go through with it when the blow-off finally came.

I watched Mason pull on his bat-winged chaps an' swing onto his big black horse. He rode just behind the

foreman. As soon as the men were mounted we followed them to the corral. The Ole Man told me to hold the "cut." It put me off by myself. Occasionally I'd get a flash of Mason through the dust. But he didn't come anywhere close. I'll never forget the relief I felt when I saw the Ole Man coming an' we started the cattle for home.

The valley had never looked so good before. I didn't have to leave! The Ole Man an' I sat late that night. He spoke about my folks. He said my dad had never took things laying down. He always seen it through. I told the Ole Man I couldn't have faced it out if it hadn't been for him. But the Ole Man only shook his head.

"You belong in the valley, Johnny Boy," he says; "you belong in the valley, son."

I thought it was all over. But it wasn't over. The blow-off came a month later. I'd gone into town alone. I'd gone into another dance. I got a room in the hotel to change clothes. My room was just off the bar. I was shaving when I heard voices at the bar. I put my razor down an' listened. It was Mason's voice. He was talking to the bartender.

"With that ole mus'-hog sitting by his rifle I didn't have a chance the other day in camp. Jackson's alone tonight."

The bartender said something. I couldn't make it out. I tried to finish shaving. I cut myself twice on the cheek. I finally got so nervous I put the razor down. Mason was speaking again:

"I s'pose I'll have to get the Ole Man later but I aim to kill Jackson tonight."

I couldn't stand it no longer. The six-shooter the Ole Man had given me was laying on the bed. I cocked the gun an' held it in the waistband of my pants. I didn't even wipe the lather off my face. Mason was still talking as I came through the door.

Mason's back was toward me. He could see me in the mirror that stood behind the bar. In the mirror I could see his gun. It was in his waistband too, where he could get it quick.

Mason made no move to turn. His hand slid toward his gun. I couldn't shoot him in the back—I was thinking

of Ole Johnson. I watched him pull the gun. He pulled it slow. An' still he made no move to turn.

Then he slid the gun across the bar. He put his head down on his arm an' cried like a little kid.

I couldn't speak. When Mason finally raised his head I pointed to the door. I never saw him again.

The bartender stood beside me. He shook my hand. He said I needed a drink. But I didn't want a drink. I wanted to be alone.

I walked into my room an' lay down on the bed. It was all I could do to make it. I felt weak an' sick all over—I didn't want any trouble.



Soapsuds

By J. E. Grinstead

OLD BEN KEMP started a herd of 15,000 stock cattle up the trail from the lower ranges of Texas, one spring in the '70's. His intention was to drive them through to Montana and peddle them out, but when he got to the Washita, in the Indian country, he stopped to consider. This was partly due to the fact that grass was mighty fine and water plenty, but principally due to his having met up with a cattle-buyer who talked like business. The shrewd old trailer was driving the big herd in sections, so he hunted up his best trail boss.

"Jones, fifteen thousand cattle is a heap of hoofs and horns," he said. "They ain't a water-hole between here and Montana that they won't drink to the mud in five minutes after they strike it. I'm goin' to sell some of 'em if I can make the dicker."

"Looks reasonable, if you can get what's right for 'em."

"Oh, the price is all right, but whether I sell or not depends on you."

"On me? How come?"

"Well, I can sell six thousand at a good price, but I got to deliver 'em at the Apache Ranch, in New Mexico. It's a ranch that Bob Ingersoll and some senator or something owns, and they're needing cattle right bad. They ain't no trail out there. I don't know the country, but I know it's bound to be a rough trip. I wouldn't close the deal until I talked to you, 'cause you're the only man I got that I'd trust them six thousand cattle with. I aim to go with the main herd to Montana. Will you take 'em?"

"Well," drawled Jones, "I ain't looking for nothing rough, but I ain't never seen no sort of a cow game that I wouldn't play one hand in. They're yo' cattle, and if you want to take the chance I orto be willin'."

"All right then, I'll close the deal."

Came evening, the deal was closed, and there was an air of satisfaction over the big cow camp. Old Ben Kemp and the cattle-buyer were sitting on a bed-roll, talking. They had eaten their supper, but the sun was not yet set. Some of the boys were sprawled about the camp, while others were just coming in from the herd. A long, stringy cowboy was stretched out on the ground, resting.

"That's the longest man I ever saw in my life," said the cattle-buyer to Kemp.

"Oh, he ain't so tall. Six foot four, in his socks. It's because he's so skinny that he looks so long, and because he's so long that he looks so skinny. That's Lem Sellers. He's the only dang cowboy I ever seen that would walk and drag a braunk by the bridle. He drives the drag, and takes it afoot about half the time. 'Sociates with little wore out dogies like they was his own folks. I believe he can understand their talk. He's a plumb good-natured, harmless, easy-goin' devil, unless he gets riled."

"Cut him across the middle, and he'd make two of that little red-headed runt that's talking to him," grunted the cowman.

"Oh, no he wouldn't," chuckled Kemp. "Ain't ary man in the world that'd make two of Sally Majors. He's got curly red hair and baby blue eyes, and a number five boot is a mile too big for him, but he's the biggest man his size that ever straddled a braunk. He rides point, and Lem drives the drag, but they're side-partners, and you can't let one of 'em alone without letting them both alone."

The two cowmen smoked in silence for a while. Presently a husky, dark-skinned, black-haired puncher with flashing white teeth swung from his saddle and approached the partners with a swagger. He began talking to Sally, but in so low a tone that nothing could be heard but an occasional blustering oath.

"Gosh! What a man," muttered the cattle-buyer. "I'd hate to tie in with him."

"Yes, that's Hamp Willett, and he's a right smart man, and seems to know it," said Kemp. "Men are a heap like

cattle. They's all sorts. Now take that fellow Hamp. He's a good cowhand, but he's always makin' trouble. He's trying to start a row with Sally right now. I been ready to fire him several times, just on that account. I'd hate to see him get shot, but I wish some fellow his size would give him a good trimming."

"That little runt isn't likely to do it."

"Not with his fists, but Hamp knows what'll happen if he ever starts for his gun. Sally would trim him to his own size mighty quick thataway."

At that moment, the long, hungry Sellers sat up on the ground. He was almost as tall in that position as was Sally, who stood near him.

"Now, see here, Hamp," drawled Sellers. "You been pickin' on Sally ever since we turned this herd loose, down on the Brazos. You ain't got the sand to shoot it out with him, but here's where you got to show yo' hand. You got to do one of three things: shoot it out with Sally, fist it out with me, or else shut up and lay off'n my pardner."

"Who the hell dealt you a hand in this game," snarled Hamp.

"I'm in any game where Sally's playin' a hand. You're always swelling around about what a real old he-man you are. Now, you're going to show somebody or shut up."

"Huh!" sneered Hamp. "You're right smart size end-ways, but you have to walk careful to keep from breaking in two. You ever run into me, and I'll break you over my knee like a kindlin' stick."

"Get that gun off!" snapped Sellers. "Talk less and do more of that rough stuff," and he unbuckled his own gun and threw it to one side.

"Better stop that mess," said the cattle-buyer.

"I'll stop it if it needs stoppin'," drawled old Ben Kemp. "Just let 'em alone a minute, and see what happens. Hamp won't fight him."

Other punchers gathered around. Kemp and the other cowman joined the circle. Willett had talked too much, and now he couldn't take back-water unless he meant

to quit the outfit. The others would hurrah him to death, and even the cook would run him ragged. Reluctantly he removed his belt and gun and handed them to one of the other men.

That particular spot in the Indian country was outside the jurisdiction of the Marquis of Queensbury at that time. There was a real fight. Hamp Willett was a physical giant and no mean antagonist for any man. Not only that, but he was playing the part of a cornered rat—he had to fight. There was no gong and no rounds. When one of them was knocked down—and they frequently were—he got up the best he could and went back to the job of caving in some part of his enemy. In two minutes Sellers had a black eye, though nobody could see how Willett ever reached that high. Both the men had dirt on their backs and trash in their long hair, from being knocked sprawling. Then Willett's wind began to leave him. He had overlooked the fact that Sellers spent much of his time on foot, hazing the little "dogies" in the drag.

It was then that Sellers went in to do his real work. He was pretty badly battered himself, but he had one eye that was still working, two fists as hard as rocks, a pair of arms as long as rails, and his footwork was unimpaired. Willett was already wheezing, when a jolt in the wind doubled him up on the ground. Lem Sellers stepped back and waited for him to get up. Hamp got up, but was barely on his feet again when Lem began to hit him with everything in the world. Finally, one of the lanky giant's wild swings touched the button, and Hamp went down for the count.

Not a man in the camp was sorry for Willett. They all felt that he had got just what was coming to him. At last the cook mercifully dashed a bucket of water in his face and brought him out of his trance.

"Are yuh licked, Hamp?" drawled Lem Sellers, blood dripping from his cut lip. "If you ain't, I got a little left in the bottle whenever you want to get up and take it."

"I'll quit," growled Willett.

"Yes, but will you lay off'n Sally and behave yo'self

decent around camp when they's company?"

"Yes."

"All right! Shake hands, now, and let's call it settled for good and any."

Willett grudgingly shook hands, and a moment later Sellers walked down to the river to bathe his battered face, Sally going with him.

"You oughtn't 'a' busted into that mess, Lem," said Sally. "You just got yo' face all busted up that way for nothin'. It won't do no good. Hamp'll lay for you. He's just lookin' for somebody to kill him, that's all."

"Oh, no. Hamp ain't bad. If this had happened before we started, he never would have made no trouble. He's like a spoilt kid, just keeps inchin' and inchin' ontel he has to be tanned. Didn't take half as long to make a Christian of him that way as it would of took by preachin' to him. He'll be all right now."

Next morning old Ben Kemp called the men all round him. "Fellers, I've sold six thousand of these cattle, and they got to be delivered in New Mexico," he announced. "Jones is going to rod the drive. They ain't no trail, and dang little water, I expect. You boys signed on to go to Montana, so I got to ask for volunteers for this New Mexico drive. Any of you that's willing to go, just step over there by Jones."

The first volunteers were Lem and Sally.

"There goes the best pointer I got, and the best drag man in the known world," chuckled Old Man Ben. "Didn't know you was so pop'lar, Jones."

Others followed, and finally the battered and apparently contrite Willett stepped over and joined Jones, making up his quota of men. There was a light of fiendish glee in Kemp's eyes, and an unuttered oath on Jones's lips, at this.

"That fellow Hamp has got a lot of sand, after all," muttered the cattle-buyer to Kemp.

"He'll need it," replied Kemp, tersely.

The 6,000 cattle were cut from the big herd. The buyer had agreed to take them as they came, and Kemp saw to

it that plenty of dogies came. He grinned as he thought of how Lem Sellers would cuss him when the herd got going and those dogies began to drop back to the drag.

"Good enough for him," chuckled old Ben, "dang his sorry soul. He had no business to quit me and go with Jones."

The cattle-buyer had been over that trail once, and that was enough for any reasonable man. He wasn't going to risk his fat carcass over it again, but was going on to Atchison, Kansas, and take the train to the south. He gave Jones a sort of waybill of the route he would have to follow.

"Say you don't know that country, Jones?" he said as he did so. "Got anybody in your outfit that does know it?"

"I know it," said Hamp Willett, who was standing near. "You keep right up the divide between the Washita and the Canadian, until you strike the Panhandle. Then you leave Mobeetie to the left, strike the Canadian and follow it on out past Tuscosa, to the headwaters. From the last water on the Canadian to the Snowden pond is forty mile. Then it's around a hundred mile from Snowden Pond to the next water, at Ute Creek and Palo Blanco."

"Sounds nice and dry," commented Jones.

"He's right," said the buyer. "Just the route this waybill gives. You're lucky to have a man along that knows the country like that, Jones. If you should happen to miss Snowden Pond it would be a pretty long drag without water."

"Yes, it would be a little dry," commented Jones. "Of course, a hundred mile without water ain't bad, but a hundred and fifty, that's right dry. Why'n hell didn't you tell me this before I agreed to take the herd through?"

"Oh, you'll make it all right. Ever been to the Apache Ranch, Hamp?"

"No, but I know it's somewhere in around the Mesa de Agua and the big springs."

"Right again. You'll make it fine, Jones, with this fellow to show you the way."

The herds parted, Jones taking his course and heading

west, across an uncharted wilderness of prairie. Lem's drag grew steadily, and by the time they left last water on the Canadian he had about 500 that reached the bedding ground any time up to midnight.

All this time Hamp Willett was the best behaved and hardest-working man in the outfit. He had been almost invaluable to Jones, who was beginning to take a liking to the fellow. His knowledge of the country had never once been at fault. Jones thought many times what a pity it was that Lem hadn't trimmed the bully sooner.

They made the drive to Snowden Pond without losing anything, and stopped there two days to let the cattle rest and fill up for the long, hard fight they had to make over the divide to Ute Creek. It has been said that 100 miles without water isn't so bad, but it was said by men who never tried driving a drag of 6,000 cattle over it.

When the time came to move every man filled his canteen and his skin with water. The cook filled the water barrel, and the outfit moved at daylight. The men knew what driving a big herd without water was like, and they looked back longingly at the glassy pool they were leaving.

Jones was a good plainsman and had carefully taken his bearings that morning. After that he paid little attention to the route. Hamp was on the point with Sally, and Hamp seemed to know every rock and weed in the country. It was late in the afternoon of that first day out from Snowden Pond, when Jones rode to the head of the herd to look out a bedding ground for the night. As he went along, he looked away to the landmarks and shook his head. The herd was going west, supposedly, and he was on the north side of it. He didn't know just what, but he told himself that there was something radically wrong. Finally he rode up to Sally, who was pointing on the north side.

"Here, Sally," he called, "ain't we out of our course?"

"'Bout five mile, the way I figger it," replied Sally. "Hamp's been pushing 'em north for the last two hours. I spoke to him about it onct, and he cussed me out. Said he knowed the country and I didn't."

"Well, I'll speak to him and see if he'll cuss me out," said the trail boss, grimly, and he galloped off around the head of the herd.

What passed between Jones and Hamp Willett no one ever knew, for the old trail boss didn't talk much. He waved his hat at Sally, and the herd began bending back to the south.

Night came on; the cattle were bedded, and the men were eating supper when Hamp roped out his own horse and saddled it. Then he walked up to Jones, where he sat smoking and puzzling over Hamp's peculiar behavior. He was wondering if a good licking lasted only so long with Hamp and then he had to have another, had to be re-vaccinated occasionally for his old trouble.

"I'm quitting," snapped Hamp. "Gimme my money. I won't stay with no damned outfit when the boss talks to me like you did a while ago."

"Well," drawled Jones, "when a man knows east and west as well as you do, and then he goes to pointing my herd north and south especially when every inch counts on that hundred dry miles, I'm apt to say right smart to him. This ain't a very nice place to quit, but I reck'n I can spare you," and taking out his old, wrinkled pocket-book, he counted out Hamp's pay.

Willett went on and ate his supper. The head of the drag reeled into the herd, and Lem Sellers rode into camp. He was always the last one to eat. It was after dark, by this time. As Lem ate, Sally sat talking to him in low tones. He was telling Lem about the run-in between the boss and Hamp and that Hamp had quit.

"I see," said Lem. "That's what he's doing around the wagon so long. Getting his stuff out. Takes him a hell of a stretch to get a slicker and one shirt packed. I don't reck'n I'll lose no sleep a-tall, account of his going," and rolling a smoke Lem stretched out on the ground in his favorite attitude to rest.

The partners were still talking when Hamp mounted and rode away from camp. He took a course slightly south of west from the trail camp, and at an angle from the way

the herd was going.

"Now, where do you suppose that dang kioty wolf is a-heading for?" queried Sally.

"No tellin'. Mexico, where he belongs, maybe. I hope I don't never see him no more a-tall."

"I'll join you in that, Lem, but I'm afraid we'll see him again. That wolf's mean, and he prob'ly belongs to a pack. This would be one hell of a place to have a run-in with a gang of rustlers, when everything in the outfit is so dry that the skin cracks when it wrinkles."

"Oh, they ain't no rustlers working out in this God-forsaken country. They couldn't do a thing with cattle when they got 'em."

"Maybe not, but they could do something with a coupla hundred good horses. From here on I sleep with one eye at a time."

"You ain't afraid of Hamp, are you, Sally?"

"Yes. I'm afraid of him all the same like I'm afraid of any other snake. He don't look like no booger while he's in front of me and I can see him, but I can't see him now."

"You don't love Hamp none, Sally. You'd orto cultivate a Christian spirit to'ds a erring brother, like I does. Try it, if you ever see Hamp again."

"I got a hunch that if I ever see Hamp again I'll see him through right smart smoke."

"Oh, fie! You sholy don't think you're both going to that bad place the preacher talks about so much. Spread yo' blanket, son, and let's go to sleep. It'll be morning after a while," and, turning on his side, there on the bare ground, Lem pillowed his head on his arm and was asleep in a minute.

The night passed quietly enough, in spite of Sally's fears and watchfulness. Jones figured that they had made 25 miles that first day, which was murderous speed for a big herd, even though they were moving about 14-hours. He knew they had to do as well or better the second day, because toward the last, when they began to starve for water, it would be hard to keep them going at any speed. At that, they would be practically four days without water

for the cattle and horses, though they had plenty in the barrel for the men to drink, by being careful with it.

The herd was started at daylight. The men all filled their canteens. There would be no stop at noon. Every inch gained was an inch nearer water. On over the wind-swept waste the big herd crawled, like a long-drawn spotted serpent.

At sunset the cattle, now thoroughly worn out, and already suffering intensely for water, were bedded, and the men rushed to the wagon for food and water. The first dust-caked puncher to arrive grabbed the tin cup, turned the spigot, and got ready to wet his whistle. He noticed that the water looked milky in the cup. He took a mouthful and spat it out.

"Hey, Petel!" he yelled at the cook. "What the hell's the matter with this water?"

"Nothin', fur as I knows, sir," said the Negro. "I drewed me some out in a canteen, same as all the rest, this maw-nin'. I ain't paid no attention to it since. Been seeming to me all day like it tastes sorter bitter."

"Well, taste this," and he handed the cup to Pete, who took a little in his mouth and gagged.

"Good Lawd! Can't nobody drink that. It tastes just like this old yaller rawsum soap."

By that time a dozen others had arrived, among them Jones, all hot, tired, and clamoring for water. When Jones heard the news, he was dumbfounded.

"Damn that nigger!" yelled a hot-tempered puncher. "He's let a cake of soap fall into all the water we got, out here plumb in the middle of hell. I'll kill him!" and he jerked his gun.

The hard-eyed old trail boss spurred his mount in between the enraged puncher and the frightened Negro.

"Put that gun up, Lang!" he thundered. "Pete ain't a plumb damn fool. He wouldn't poison the water when he knew he couldn't get any himself. What do you know about this, Pete?"

"'Fo' Gawd, Mr. Jones, I don't know nothin' about it. I always leaves the stopper out'n the big hole at night, like

you told me to, so's the water can cool off and kinder frashen up a little. I taken it out last night, and I put it back this mawnin.' They wa'n't no soap about the bar'l."

A dozen men were speaking at once, and nobody was saying anything.

"Jus' a minute, fellers," Sally yelled at them. "I guess I got a idea what happened." Everybody stopped to listen, and Sally went on, "Last night, while Lem was eating supper, I was talking to him. Hamp Willett clomb into the wagon to get his things before he left, and he was in there a long time. I figger that Hamp just split two-three bars of that old yaller soap and shoved it through the bung-hole when nobody ain't looking, and then rides off. A whole cake wouldn't go through that hole, and besides—"

"That won't do, Sally. If it had been done last night, we'd have tasted it. We been drinking it all day," said one.

"I did taste it," declared Sally. "Water's been bitter all day."

"I, too," came from half a dozen.

"That old soap is as hard as the devil's head, and dry clean to the holler," went on Sally. "It just sinks to the bottom, and don't hurt much by morning. Then, when the wagon started and the water begin to slosh and churn about, it just naturally turned the whole blame barrel to soapsuds, that's all."

"Hell, Sally!" roared a leathery old puncher. "A human wouldn't do nothin' like that!"

"No, a human wouldn't, but Hamp ain't no human. He's a kioty wolf, and they's something more to—"

"Well," snapped Jones, who was a man of quick action in emergency, "arguing, giving theories, getting mad and wanting to shoot somebody, won't help us any. Water's as close in ahead of us as it is in back of us, and maybe a little to it. Pete, hitch up yo' mules and hit the trail, and don't stop until you strike water. As soon as you do strike it, wash out that barrel, fill it, and turn back. Get a fresh team some way if you can, because that one will be dead. Start the herd, fellows. They got to travel, whether they

can travel or not. It's hell, but it's the only chance we got, so crack into it."

As the others turned away, Sally hesitated. Jones noticed it, and called him aside.

"You said there was something more to this," he said. "Let's have it quick; we got to move."

"Why, I meant to say that Hamp's a kioty wolf, and wolfs goes in packs. Right when everybody's dead for sleep and water, would be a good time for a pack like Hamp's to cut in and take our *remuda*. They wouldn't want cattle, mebbe, away out here, and—"

"I hadn't thought of anything like that," said Jones, "but it could happen. Pass it on to the boys, and then get on to the point and keep your eyes open. You can keep the course by the stars, can't you?"

"Shore!" and Sally turned his jaded horse toward the head of the big herd.

Without a murmur the little man was going to take the vanguard of that herd, pilot it by the stars, and take a chance on being waylaid and shot by Hamp and his gang.

"God puts some whalin' big souls in mighty little bodies, sometimes," mused Jones, as he rode back to break the news to Lem, who hadn't got in sight with the drag yet.

"Right smart hell," drawled Lem. "I can't spit off'n my chin now. What water I had today weren't fit to drink. Go ahead and do yo' damndest; I'll look after the drag the best I can. Tell the first feller that hits a water-hole to bring me a gourdful."

"There's another one," growled Jones to himself, as he rode back toward the herd. "Hollow in him ain't as big as a stretched rope, but they's more guts in it than ary elephant ever had. All I want is just to get my hands on Hamp Willett one time, or get one squint at him over a gun-sight. I reck'n Sally's got it figgered about right. Trying to murder the whole outfit. If he does bring a gang of rustlers, I aim to get one, and his name ain't nothin' but Hamp Willett. He could do what he likes to me, but he can't murder my men and get away with it, damn him!"

When the sun rose next morning, the herd was strung

out and reeling along. They had made ten or twelve miles during the night. Far across the prairie could be seen the wagon, just going out of sight on the horizon, while fully five miles behind the main herd Lem Sellers could be seen walking back and forth behind the drag, doggedly hazing them on. No attack had been made by rustlers. Not a living thing could be seen to the north or south of the trail. Just an endless expanse of parched, stunted grass and weeds, while high in the vaulted blue, looking no larger than blackbirds, scores of buzzards wheeled about, looking down at a prospective feast.

That day was a nightmare. Men, horses and cattle, all starving for water, yet fighting doggedly on. No stop was made. There was nothing to stop for. Every step made was a step toward life and safety. The cattle were worn out and ready to drop, and only constant effort on the part of the men kept them moving.

Night again, and still no stop. Cattle dropped by the way. Just gave out and lay down. Some of them would get up when they cooled off a little, but many would never rise again. No attention was paid to them, now.

Never in all the annals of trail driving did the sun rise on a more pitiable sight or a more desperate situation than on that second morning. Nobody knew how much farther it was to water, because they couldn't tell what rate of speed the herd had made. They would certainly reach water that day, but would they live to reach it? They could see the sunlight falling on red and yellow buttes far to the west of them, but they didn't know where they were. It might be Mesa de Agua, with its gushing springs, and it might not. In that deceptive rarefied atmosphere it might be ten miles, and it might be thirty. Worse still, it might be nothing but a mirage.

The men finally gave up, as the sun climbed to the zenith. They had reached the limit of human endurance, and by common consent pushed forward toward water, leaving the cattle to their fate. Jones made no protest, but rode with them. He never had abandoned a herd before in his life, but he had never been caught in such a

situation as this. They had passed the head of the herd and caught up with old Simone, the Mexican wrangler who was driving the *remuda*. Suddenly there was a rattling of horns and a cracking of hoofs behind them. True to the cowboy's instinct to prevent a "run," every man whirled his reeling horse in ahead of the herd, prepared to stop them.

"Turn 'em all loose and get out of the way!" roared the old trail boss, through parched and cracking lips. "They smell water, and all hell couldn't stop 'em, and I don't blame 'em a damned bit."

He got no further. The *remuda* had vanished, and by some magic of horsemanship old Simone had gone with them. Jones's horse raised its head, whinnied, and what was a dead horse a moment ago was gone like the wind.

Far toward the head of that wild stampede, at a safe distance to one side, Sally was getting the utmost out of a horse that might fall dead at the edge of the water-hole.

An hour later, when Jones was in sight of the ranch and water, Sally came flashing by on a fresh mount that he had managed to get somewhere in some way. He had two canteens of water lashed to his saddle horn.

"Only five mile further," he yelled, as he flashed by. "Pete's comin' with the water barrel."

"Goin' to Lem," muttered Jones. "God! It means something to have a human friend like that. Half dead, no sleep since God knows when, and nothin' to eat since he can remember, but goin' to his partner, hell or no hell."

Still fully 20 miles from water, Lem Sellers was weaving back and forth behind the drag, on foot. He had fastened his chaps and gun to his saddle, in order to lighten his load, and had turned his horse loose; the animal was reeling along with the dogies, caked with dust and sweat, its eyes staring and its flanks drawn, while Lem staggered on grimly after them. He felt pretty sure that they would reach water that day. Somebody, he knew, had got on to water. He knew Sally would bring him water at the earliest moment possible. If he could just hold out a little longer and not fall down on that hot, parched ground,

which would bake him in a few minutes. If there were any shade, he'd stop, but there was none.

Lem turned his head and saw a lone horseman. He was coming up a deep swale in the prairie from the south. Lem wondered if he had lost the trail and was out of the course. The sun was almost straight over his head, and he couldn't tell the direction, but he thought that was south. No matter. The direction made no difference to him now. If only he could get a little water. That would be Sally, coming with water, of course, but—no, that couldn't be Sally. The rider was too big. Lem stopped and stood still, to wait. It made no difference who the man was; water was the thing. He shaded his eyes with his hand and stared. The man came nearer, and he saw that it was Hamp Willett! He rode up to within a few feet of Lem and stopped.

"Gimme some water, for God'sake, Hamp!" begged Lem.

"Yes, I will!" sneered Hamp. "I got some, but you don't get a drop of it. How does yo' damned outfit like soapsuds as a beverage anyway?"

"Gimme a little water, Hamp!" pleaded Lem.

"Not a drop! You beat me up back there on the Washita, didn't you? Well, I guess yo' wind ain't no better than mine, right now, and I'm going to give you what you gave me."

Lem understood now that man intended to torture him to death. If he had his gun, he could end it quick enough, either by killing Hamp or getting killed himself, but his gun was on the saddle and he was too weak to make a run for his horse, which was some distance away. He braced himself the best he could.

"I may be down to yo' size one way, but a chigger'd look like an elephant by the side of you when it comes to being a man," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, you can still talk smart, can't you? I'll start the party just for that. Wait until I take a drink," and, raising his canteen to his lips, he took a long draft.

Then, dismounting, he strode toward Sellers. Feinting

clumsily, Lem managed to trip him once, and he fell sprawling in the dusty trail. He hadn't expected the exhausted Sellers to put up any sort of a defense. He rose now and stormed at Lem like an enraged beast. It had been his purpose to prolong the agony of his victim, and it still was, but he'd batter him until he was no longer dangerous, and then take his time with the job. Playing for position, he struck Lem a terrific blow which felled him flat, but there was still fight in the rangy giant. His head was still working, and he dragged himself slowly to one knee. He was going to prolong that fight all he could, in the hope that someone would come to his rescue.

"Get on up so I can knock you down again!" snarled Hamp. "That's the way you done me, damn you!"

Stung by the taunt, Lem got to his feet. Hamp's fist thudded home again, and Lem measured his length in the dust, but Hamp didn't follow up his advantage. A horse skidded to a stop in a swirl of dust.

"Just a minute!" said Sally, and Hamp looked at him with a sickening feeling. "That's your game, is it? You've killed Lem—now what are you going to do with me?"

There was terrible, cold certitude in his voice. Hamp knew what was going to happen, but he'd at least try. He reached for his gun.

"Go ahead and get it," prompted Sally. "I'm going to kill you, but be man enough to take a chance."

Hamp's gun was out of the scabbard and coming up to the mark, when Sally's hand flashed to his holster. There were two shots, but only one found a mark.

"Just a little. Drink it slow, pardner!" pleaded Sally, holding Lem's head up in the shade of the pony from which he had just dismounted. "You can't stand much, at first. Let me pour some out'n this other canteen, on the back of yo' neck."

It was half an hour before Lem was fit to move. Sally brought up Lem's horse and, when he was able to stand, helped him to mount it. Lem had been out entirely when the shots were fired and knew nothing about them. When

he was balanced in his saddle, but still groggy, he saw another horse standing off a little way.

"Who's braunk is that, Sally?" he asked.

"Hamp's."

"Oh, yes. I remember, now. Where is Hamp?"

"There he is," and Sally nodded his head to where the body lay on the ground at a little distance.

"You didn't give him much chance, did you, Sally?"

"'Bout the same he was giving you. What did he say to you before he killed you?"

"Not much. Wouldn't give me any water. Asked me how our outfit likes soapsuds, and that's about all."

"That was aplenty. Let's ride from here."

"No! I'm all right, now. I can't leave my dogies."

"Turn 'em loose. They'll drift in. They'll smell water pretty soon, and you couldn't hold 'em if you tried."

The partners got into camp that night, and in a few days they were as good as new. One evening, as Sally sat smoking a cigarette meditatively, Jones approached him.

"Sally," said he, "some of these Apache ranch folks told me they rid out the trail we come the other day and found a braunk that was about dead for water, a good saddle and six-shooter, and a mess that had to be buried. Know anything about it?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Soapsuds."

The Holdup

By Clarence E. Mulford

THE HERD delivered at Sandy Creek had traveled only half-way, for the remaining part of the journey would be on the railroad. The work of loading the cars was fast, furious fun to anyone who could find humor enough in his make-up to regard it so. Then came a long, wearying ride for the five men picked from the drive outfit to attend the cattle on the way to the cattle pens of the city. Their work at last done, they "saw the sights" and were now returning to Sandy Creek.

The baggage smoking-car reeked with strong tobacco, the clouds of smoke shifting with the air currents, and dimly through the haze could be seen several men. Three of these were playing cards near the baggage-room door, while two more lounged in a seat halfway down the aisle and on the other side of the car. Across from the card-players, reading a magazine, was a fat man, and near the water cooler was a dyspeptic-looking individual who was grumbling about the country through which he was passing.

The first five, as their wearing apparel proclaimed, were not of the kind usually found on trains, not the drummer, the tourist, or the farmer. Their heads were covered with heavy sombreros, their coats were of thick, black woolens, and their shirts were also of wool. Around the throat of each was a large handkerchief, knotted at the back; their trousers were protected by "chaps," of which three were of goatskin. The boots were tight-fitting, narrow, and with high heels, and to them were strapped heavy spurs. Around the waist, hanging loosely from one hip, each wore a wide belt containing fifty cartridges in the loops, and supporting a huge Colt's revolver, which rested against the thigh.

They were happy and were trying to sing but, owing to different tastes, there was noticeable a lack of harmony. "Oh Susanna" never did go well with "Annie Laurie," and as for "Dixie," it was hopelessly at odds with the other two. But they were happy, exuberantly so, for they had enjoyed their relaxation in the city and now were returning to the station where their horses were waiting to carry them over the 200 miles which lay between their ranch and the nearest railroad station.

For a change the city had been pleasant, but after they had spent several days there it lost its charm and would not have been acceptable to them even as a place in which to die. They had spent their money, smoked "top-notcher" cigars, seen the "shows" and feasted each as his fancy dictated, and as behooved cowpunchers with money in their pockets. Now they were glad that every hour reduced the time of their stay in the smoky, jolting, rocking train, for they did not like trains, and this train was particularly bad. So they passed the hours as best they might and waited impatiently for the stop at Sandy Creek, where they had left their horses. Their trip to the "fence country" was now a memory, and they chafed to be again in the saddle on the open, wind-swept range, where miles were insignificant and the silence soothing.

The fat man, despairing of reading, watched the card-players and smiled in good humor as he listened to their conversation, while the dyspeptic, nervously twisting his newspaper, wished that he were at his destination. The baggage-room door opened and the conductor looked down on the card-players and grinned. Skinny moved over in the seat to make room for the genial conductor.

"Sit down, Simms, an' take a hand," he invited. Laughter arose continually and the fat man joined in it, leaning forward more closely to watch the play.

Lanky tossed his cards face down on the board and grinned at the onlooker. "Billy shore bluffs more on a variegated flush than any man I ever saw."

"Call him once in a while and he'll get cured of it," laughed the fat man, bracing himself as the train swung

around a sharp turn.

"He's too smart," growled Billy Williams. "He tried that an' found I didn't have no variegated flushes. Come on, Lanky, if yo're playing cards, put up."

Farther down the car, their feet resting easily on the seat in front of them, Hopalong and Red puffed slowly at their large, black cigars and spoke infrequently, both idly watching the plain flit by in wearying sameness, and both tired and lazy from doing nothing but ride.

"Blast th' cars, anyhow," grunted Hopalong, but he received no reply, for his companion was too disgusted to say anything.

A startling, sudden increase in the roar of the train and a gust of hot, sulphurous smoke caused Hopalong to look up at the brakeman, who came down the swaying aisle as the door slammed shut.

"Phew!" he exclaimed, genially. "Why in thunder don't you fellows smoke up?"

Hopalong blew a heavy ring, stretched energetically, and grinned. "Much farther to Sandy Creek?"

"Oh, you don't get off for three hours yet," laughed the brakeman.

"That's shore a long time to ride this bronc train," moodily complained Red as the singing began. "She shore pitches a-plenty," he added.

The train-hand smiled and seated himself on the arm of the front seat. "Oh, it might be worse."

"Not this side of Hades," replied Red with decision, watching his friend, who was slapping the cushions to see the dust fly out. "Hey, let up on that, will you! There's dust a-plenty without no help from you!"

The brakeman glanced at the card-players and then at Hopalong. "Do your friends always sing like that?" he inquired.

"Mostly, but sometimes it's worse."

"On the level?"

"Shore enough; they're singing 'Dixie,' now. It's their best song."

"That ain't 'Dixiel' "

"Yes, it is—that is, most of it."

"Well, then, what's the rest of it?"

"Oh, them's variations of their own," remarked Red, yawning and stretching. "Just wait till they start something sentimental; you'll shore weep."

"I hope they stick to the variations. Say, you must be a pretty nifty gang on the shoot, ain't you?"

"Oh, some," answered Hopalong.

"I wish you fellers had been aboard with us one day about a month ago. We was the wrong end of a hold-up, and we got cleaned out proper, too."

"An' how many of 'em did you get?" asked Hopalong quickly, sitting bolt upright.

The fat man suddenly lost his interest in the card-game and turned an eager ear to the brakeman, while the dyspeptic stopped punching holes in his time-card and listened. The card-players glanced up and then returned to their game, but they, too, were listening.

The brakeman was surprised. "How many did we get! Gosh, we didn't get none! They was six to our five."

"How many cards did you draw, you Piute?" asked Lanky.

"None of yore business; I ain't dealing, an' I wouldn't tell you if I was," retorted Billy.

"Well, I can ask, can't I?"

"Yes—you can, an' did."

"You didn't get none?" cried Hopalong, doubting his ears.

"I should say not!"

"An' they owned th' whole train?"

"They did."

Red laughed. "Th' cleaning-up must have been sumptuous an' elevating."

"Every time I holds three's he allus has better," growled Lanky to Simms.

"On th' level, we couldn't do a thing," the brakeman ran on. "There's a water tank a little farther on, and they must 'a' climbed aboard there when we stopped to connect. When we got into the gulch the train slowed down

and stopped, and I started to get up to go out and see what was the matter; but I saw *that* when I looked down a gun barrel. The man at the throttle end of it told me to put up my hands, but they were up as high then as I could get 'em without climbin' on the top of the seat."

"Can't you listen and play at th' same time?" Lanky asked Billy.

"I wasn't countin' on takin' the gun away from him," the brakeman continued, "for I was too busy watchin' for the slug to come out of the hole. Pretty soon somebody on the outside whistled and then another feller come in the car—he was the one that did the cleanin' up. All this time there had been a lot of shootin' outside, but now it got worse. Then I heard another whistle and the engine puffed up the track, and about five minutes later there was a big explosion, and then our two robbers backed out of the car among the rocks, shootin' back regardless. They busted a lot of windows."

"An' you didn't git none," grumbled Hopalong, regretfully.

"When we got to the express car, what had been pulled around the turn," continued the brakeman, not heeding the interruption, "we found a wreck. And we found the engineer and fireman standin' over the express messenger, too scared to know he wouldn't come back no more. The car had been blowed up with dynamite, and his fighting soul went with it. He never knowed he was licked."

"An' nobody tried to help him!" Hopalong exclaimed, wrathfully now.

"Nobody wanted to die with him," replied the brakeman.

"Well," cried the fat man, suddenly reaching for his valise, "I'd like to see anybody try to hold me up!" Saying which he brought forth a small revolver.

"You'd be praying out of your bald spot about that time," muttered the brakeman.

Hopalong and Red turned, perceived the weapon, and then exchanged winks.

"That's a fine shootin'-iron, stranger," gravely re-

marked Hopalong.

"You bet it is," purred the owner, proudly. "I paid six dollars for that gun."

Lanky smothered a laugh and his friend grinned broadly. "I reckon that'd kill a man—if you stuck it in his ear."

"Pshaw!" snorted the dyspeptic scornfully. "You wouldn't have time to get it out of that grip. Think a train-robber is going to let you unpack? Why don't you carry it in your hip pocket, where you can get at it quickly?"

There were smiles at the stranger's belief in the hip-pocket fallacy but no one commented upon it.

"Wasn't there no passengers aboard when you was stuck up?" Lanky asked the conductor.

"Yes, but you can't count passengers in on a deal like that."

Hopalong looked around aggressively. "We're passengers, ain't we?"

"You certainly are."

"Well, if any misguided maverick gets it into his fool head to stick *us* up, you see what happens. Don't you know th' fellers outside have all th' worst o' th' deal?"

"They have not!" cried the brakeman.

"They've got all the best of it," asserted the conductor emphatically. "I've been inside, and I know."

"Best nothing!" cried Hopalong. "They are on th' ground, watching a danger-line over a hundred yards long, full of windows and doors. Then they brace th' door of a car full of people. While they climb up the steps they can't see inside, an' then they go an' stick their heads in plain sight. It's an even break who sees th' other first, with th' men inside training their guns on th' glass in th' door!"

"Darned if you ain't right!" enthusiastically cried the fat man.

Hopalong laughed. "It all depends on th' men inside. If they ain't used to handling guns, 'course they won't try to fight. We've been in so many gun festivals that we wouldn't stop to think. If any coin collector went an' stuck

his ugly face against th' glass in that door he'd turn a back-flip off'n th' platform before he knowed he was hit. Is there any chance for a stick-up today, d'y think?"

"Can't tell," replied the brakeman. "But this is about the time we have the section-camps' pay on board," he said, going into the baggage end of the car.

Simms leaned over close to Skinny. "It's on this train now, and I'm worried to death about it. I wish we were at Sandy Creek."

"Don't you go worryin' none, then," the puncher replied. "It'll get to Sandy Creek all right."

Hopalong looked out of the window again and saw that there was a gradual change in the nature of the scenery, for the plain was becoming more broken each succeeding mile. Small woods occasionally hurtled past and banks of cuts flashed by like mottled yellow curtains, shutting off the view. Scrub timber stretched away on both sides, a billowy sea of green, and miniature valleys lay under the increasing number of trestles twisting and winding toward a high horizon.

Hopalong yawned again. "Well, it's none o' our funeral. If they let us alone I don't reckon we'll take a hand, not even to bust up this monotony."

Red laughed derisively. "Oh, no! Why, you couldn't sit still nohow with a fight going on, an' you know it. An' if it's a stick-up! Wow!"

"Who gave you any say in this?" demanded his friend. "Anyhow, you ain't no angel o' peace, not nohow!"

"Mebby they'll plug yore new sombrero," laughed Red.

Hopalong felt of the article in question. "If any two-laigged wolf plugs my war-bonnet he'll be some sorry, an' so'll his folks," he asserted, rising and going down the aisle for a drink.

Red turned to the brakeman, who had just returned. "Say," he whispered, "get off at th' next stop, shoot off a gun, an' yell, just for fun. Go ahead, it'll be better'n a circus."

"Nix on the circus, says I," hastily replied the other. "I ain't looking for no excitement, an' I ain't paid to amuse

th' passengers. I hope we don't even run over a track-torpedo this side of Sandy Creek."

Hopalong returned, and as he came even with them the train slowed. "What are we stopping for?" he asked, his hand going to his holster.

"To take on water, the tank's right ahead."

"What have you got?" asked Billy, ruffling his cards.

"None of yore business," replied Lanky. "You call when you gets any curious."

"Oh, th' devil!" yawned Hopalong, leaning back lazily. "I shore wish I was on my cayuse pounding leather on th' home trail."

"Me, too," grumbled Red, staring out of the window. "Well, we're moving again. It won't be long now before we gets out of this."

The card-game continued, the low-spoken terms being interspersed with casual comment. Hopalong exchanged infrequent remarks with Red, while the brakeman and conductor stared out of the same window. There was noticeable an air of anxiety, and the fat man tried to read his magazine with his thoughts far from the printed page. He read and re-read a single paragraph several times without gaining the slightest knowledge of what it meant, while the dyspeptic passenger fidgeted more and more in his seat, like one sitting on hot coals, anxious and alert.

"We're there now," suddenly remarked the conductor, as the bank of a cut blanked out the view. "It was right here where it happened—the turn's farther on."

"How many cards did you draw, Skinny?" asked Lanky.

"Three, drawin' to a straight flush," laughed the dealer.

"Here's the turn! We're through all right," exclaimed the brakeman.

Suddenly there was a rumbling bump, a screeching of air brakes and the grinding and rattle of couplings and pins as the train slowed down and stopped with a suddenness that snapped the passengers forward and back. The conductor and brakeman leaped to their feet, where the latter stood quietly during a moment of indecision.

A shot was heard and the conductor's hand, raised

quickly to the whistle rope, sent blast after blast shrieking over the land. A babel of shouting burst from the other coaches and, as the whistle shrieked without pause, a shot was heard close at hand and the conductor reeled suddenly and sank into a seat, limp and silent.

At the first jerk of the train the card-players threw the board from across their knees, scattering the cards over the floor, and, crouching, gained the center of the aisle, intently peering through the windows, their Colts ready for instant action. Hopalong and Red were also in the aisle, and when the conductor had reeled Hopalong's Colt exploded and the man outside threw up his arms and pitched forward.

"Good boy, Hopalong!" cried Skinny.

Hopalong wheeled and crouched, watching the door, and it was not long before a masked face appeared on the farther side of the glass. Hopalong fired and a splotch of red stained the white mask as the robber fell against the door and slid to the platform.

"Hear that shooting?" cried the brakeman. "They're at the messenger. They'll blow him up!"

"Come on, fellers!" cried Hopalong, leaping toward the door, closely followed by his friends.

They stepped over the obstruction on the platform and jumped to the ground on the side of the car farthest from the robbers.

"Shoot under the cars for legs," whispered Skinny. "That'll bring 'em down where we can get 'em."

"Which is a good idea," replied Red, dropping quickly and looking under the car.

"Somebody's going to be surprised, all right," exulted Hopalong.

The firing on the other side of the train was heavy, being for the purpose of terrifying the passengers and to forestall concerted resistance. The robbers could not distinguish between the many reports and did not know they were being opposed, or that two of their number were dead.

A whinny reached Hopalong's ears and he located it

in a small grove ahead of him. "Well, we know where th' cayuses are in case they make a break."

A white and scared face peered out of the cab window and Hopalong stopped his finger just in time, for the inquisitive man wore the cap of fireman.

"You idiot!" muttered the gunman angrily. "Get back!" he ordered.

A pair of legs ran swiftly along the other side of the car and Red and Skinny fired instantly. The legs bent, their owner falling forward behind the rear truck, where he was screened from sight.

"They had it their own way before!" gritted Skinny. "Now we'll see if they can stand th' iron!"

By this time Hopalong and Red were crawling under the express car and were so preoccupied that they did not notice the faint blue streak of smoke immediately over their heads. Then Red glanced up to see what it was that sizzed, saw the glowing end of a three-inch fuse, and blanched. It was death not to dare and his hand shot up and back, and the dynamite cartridge sailed far behind him to the edge of the embankment, where it hung on a bush.

"Good!" panted Hopalong. "We'll pay 'em for that!"

"They're worse than rustlers!"

They could hear the messenger running about over their heads, dragging and up-ending heavy objects against the doors of the car, and Hopalong laughed grimly.

"Luck's with this messenger, all right."

"It ought to be—he's a fighter."

"Where are they? Have they tumbled to our game?"

"They're waiting for the explosion, you chump."

"Stay where you are, then. Wait till they come out to see what's th' matter with it."

Red snorted. "Wait nothing!"

"All right, then. I'm with you. Get out of my way."

"I've been in situations some peculiar, but this beats 'em all," Red chuckled, crawling forward.

The robber by the car truck revived enough to realize that something was radically wrong, and shouted a warn-

ing as he raised himself on his elbow to fire at Skinny, but the alert puncher shot first.

As Hopalong and Red emerged from beneath the car and rose to their feet there was a terrific explosion and they were knocked to the ground, while a sudden, heavy shower of stones and earth rained down over everything. The two punchers were not hurt and they arose to their feet in time to see the engineer and fireman roll out of the cab and crawl along the track on their hands and knees, dazed and weakened by the concussion.

Suddenly, from one of the day-coaches, a masked man looked out, saw the two punchers, and cried, "It's all up! Save yourselves!"

As Hopalong and Red looked around, still dazed, he fired at them, the bullet singing past Hopalong's ear. Red smothered a curse and reeled as his friend grasped him. A wound over his right eye was bleeding profusely and Hopalong's face cleared of its look of anxiety when he realized that it was not serious.

"They creased you! Blamed near got you for keeps!" he cried, wiping away the blood with his sleeve.

Red, slightly stunned, opened his eyes and looked about confusedly. "Who done that? Where is he?"

"Don't know, but I'll shore find out," Hopalong replied. "Can you stand alone?"

Red pushed himself free and leaned against the car for support. "Course I can! Git that cuss!"

When Skinny heard the robber shout the warning he wheeled and ran back, intently watching the windows and doors of the car for trouble. "We'll finish yore tally right here!" he muttered.

When he reached the smoker he turned and went toward the rear, where he found Lanky and Billy lying under the platform. Billy was looking back and guarding the rear, while his companion watched the clump of trees where the second herd of horses was known to be. Just as they were joined by their foreman, they saw two men run across the track, 50 yards distant, and into the grove, both going so rapidly as to give no chance for a shot at them.

"There they are!" shouted Skinny, opening fire on the grove.

At that instant Hopalong turned the rear platform and saw the brakeman leap out of the door with a Winchester in his hands. The puncher sprang up the steps, wrenched the rifle from its owner, and, tossing it to Skinny, cried, "Here, this is better!"

"Too late," grunted the puncher, looking up, but Hopalong had become lost to sight among the rocks along the right of way. "If I only had this a minute ago!" he grumbled.

The men in the grove, now in the saddle, turned and opened fire on the group by the train, driving them back to shelter. Skinny, taking advantage of the cover afforded, ran toward the grove, ordering his friends to spread out and surround it; but it was too late, for at that minute galloping was heard and it grew rapidly fainter.

Red appeared at the end of the train. "Where's th' rest of the coyotes?"

"Two of 'em got away," Lanky replied.

"Ya-ho!" shouted Hopalong from the grove. "Don't none of you fools shoot! I'm coming out. They plumb got away!"

"They near got *you*, Red," Skinny cried.

"Nears don't count," Red laughed.

"Did you ever notice Hopalong when he's fighting mad?" asked Lanky, grinning at the man who was leaving the woods. "He allus wears his sombrero hanging on one ear. Look at it now!"

"Who touched off that cannon some time back?" asked Billy.

"I did. It was an anti-gravity cartridge what I found sizzling on a rod under th' floor of th' express car," replied Red.

"Why didn't you pinch out th' fuse 'stead of blowing everything up, you half-breed?" Lanky asked.

"I reckon I was some hasty," grinned Red.

"It blowed me under th' car an' my lid through a windy," cried Billy. "An' Skinny, he went up in th' air

like a shore-nough grasshopper."

Hopalong joined them, grinning broadly. "Hey, reckon ridin' in th' cars ain't so bad after all, is it?"

"Holy smoke!" cried Skinny. "What's that a-popping?"

Hopalong, Colt in hand, leaped to the side of the train and looked along it, the others close behind him, and saw the fat man with his head and arm out of the window, blazing away into the air, which increased the panic in the coaches. Hopalong grinned and fied into the ground, and the fat man nearly dislocated parts of his anatomy by his hasty disappearance.

"Reckon he plumb forgot all about his fine, six-dollar gun till just now," Skinny laughed.

"Oh, he's making good," Red replied. "He said he'd take a hand if anything busted loose. It's a good thing he didn't come to life while me an' Hoppy was under his windy looking for laigs."

"Reckon some of us better go in th' cars an' quiet th' stampede," Skinny remarked, mounting the steps, followed by Hopalong. "They're shore loco."

The uproar in the coach ceased abruptly when the two punchers stepped through the door, the inmates shrinking into their seats, frightened into silence. Skinny and his companion did not make a reassuring sight, for they were grimy with burned powder and dust, and Hopalong's sleeve was stained with Red's blood.

"Oh, my jewels, my pretty jewels," sobbed a woman, staring at Skinny and wringing her hands.

"Ma'am, we shore don't want vore jewelry," replied Skinny, earnestly. "Ca'm yoreself. We don't want nothin'."

"I don't want that!" growled Hopalong, pushing a wallet from him. "How many times do you want us to tell you we don't want nothin'? We ain't robbers. We licked the robbers."

Suddenly he stooped and, grasping a pair of legs which protruded into the aisle obstructing the passage, straightened up and backed toward Red, who had just entered the car, dragging into sight a portly gentleman, who kicked and struggled and squealed, as he grabbed at the

stanchions of seats to stay his progress. Red stepped aside between two seats and let his friend pass, and then leaned over and grasped the portly gentleman's coat collar. He tugged energetically and lifted the frightened man clear of the aisle and deposited him across the back of a seat, face down, where he hung balanced, yelling and kicking.

"Shut yore face, you cave-hunter!" cried Red in disgust. "Stop that infernal noise! You fat fellers make all yore noise after th' fighting is all over!"

The man on the seat, suddenly realizing what a sight he made, rolled off his perch and sat up, now more angry than frightened. He glared at Red's grinning face and sputtered:

"It's an outrage! It's an outrage! I'll have you hung for this day's work, young man!"

"That's right," grinned Hopalong. "He shore deserves it. I told him more'n once that he'd get strung up some day."

"Yes and you, too!"

"Please don't," begged Hopalong. "I don't want t' diel!"

Tense as the past quarter of an hour had been a titter ran along the car and, fuming impotently, the portly gentleman fled into the smoker.

"I'll bet he had a six-dollar gun, too," laughed Red.

"I'll bet he's calling hisself names right about now," Hopalong replied. Then he turned to reply to a woman. "Yes, ma'am, we did. But they wasn't real badmen."

At this a young woman, who was about as pretty as any young woman could be, arose and ran to Hopalong and, impulsively throwing her arms around his neck, cried, "You brave man! You hero! You dear!"

"Skinny! Red! Help!" cried the embarrassed puncher, struggling to get free.

She kissed him on the cheek, which flamed even more red as he made frantic efforts to keep his head back.

"Ma'am!" he cried, desperately. "Leggo, ma'am! Leggo!"

"Oh! Ho! Ho!" roared Red, weak from his mirth and, not looking to see what he was doing, he dropped into a seat beside another woman. He was on his feet instantly.

Fearing that he would have to go through the ordeal his friend was going through, he fled down the aisle, closely followed by Hopalong, who by this time had managed to break away. Skinny backed off suspiciously and kept close watch on Hopalong's admirer.

Just then the brakeman entered the car, grinning, and Skinny asked about the condition of the conductor.

"Oh, he's all right now," the brakeman replied. "They shot him through the arm, but he's repaired and out bossin' the job of clearin' the rocks off the track. He's a little shaky yet, but he'll come around all right."

"That's good. I'm shore glad to hear it."

"Won't you wear this pin as a small token of my gratitude?" asked a voice at Skinny's shoulder.

He wheeled and raised his sombrero, a flush stealing over his face. "Thank you, ma'am, but I don't want no pay. We was plumb glad to do it."

"But this is not pay! It is just a trifling token of my appreciation of your courage, just something to remind you of it. I shall feel hurt if you refuse."

Her quick fingers had pinned it to his shirt while she spoke and he thanked her as well as his embarrassment would permit. Then there was a rush toward him and, having visions of a shirt looking like a jeweler's window, he turned and fled from the car, crying, "Pin 'em on the brakeman!"

He found the outfit working at a pile of rocks on the track, under the supervision of the conductor, and Hopalong looked up apprehensively at Skinny's approach.

"Lord!" he ejaculated, grinning sheepishly, "I was some scairt you was a woman."

Red dropped the rock he was carrying and laughed derisively. "Oh, yo're a brave man, you are! Scared to death by a purty female girl! If I'd 'a' been you I wouldn't 'a' run, not a step!"

Hopalong looked at him witheringly. "Oh, no! You wouldn't 'a' run! You'd dropped dead in your tracks, you would!"

"You was both of you a whole lot scared," Skinny

laughed. Then, turning to the conductor: "How do you feel, Simms?"

"Oh, I'm all right, but it took the starch out of me for a while."

"Well, I don't wonder, not a bit."

"You fellows certainly don't waste any time getting busy," Simms laughed.

"That's the secret of gun-fightin'," replied Skinny.

"Well, you're a fine crowd, all right. Any time you want to go any place when you're broke, climb aboard my train and I'll see't you get there."

"Much obliged."

Simms turned to the express car. "Hey, Jackson! You can open up now if you want to."

But the express messenger was suspicious, fearing that the conductor was talking with a gun at his head. "You go to hell!" he called back.

"Honest!" laughed Simms. "Some cowboy friends o' mine licked the gang. Didn't you hear that dynamite go off? If they hadn't fished it out from under your feet you'd be communing with the angels 'bout now."

For a moment there was no response, and then Jackson could be heard dragging things away from the door. When he was told of the cartridge and Red had been pointed out to him as the man who had saved his life, he leaped to the ground and ran to where that puncher was engaged in carrying the ever-silenced robbers to the baggage car. He shook hands with Red, who laughed depreciatingly, and then turned and assisted him.

Hopalong came up and grinned. "Say, there's some cayuses in that grove up th' track. Shall I go up an' get 'em?"

"Shore! I'll go an' get 'em with you," replied Skinny.

In the grove they found seven horses picketed, two of them pack-animals, and they led them forth and reached the train as the others came up.

"Well, here's five saddled cayuses, an' two others," Skinny grinned.

"Then we can ride th' rest of th' way in th' saddle in-

stead of in that blamed train," Red eagerly suggested:

"That's just what we can do," replied Skinny. "Leather beats car seats any time. How far are we from Sandy Creek, Simms?"

"About twenty miles."

"An' we can ride along th' track, too," suggested Hopalong.

"We shore can," laughed Skinny, shaking hands with the train crew. "We're some glad we rode with you this trip. We've had a fine time."

"And we're glad you did," Simms replied, "for that ain't no joke, either."

Hopalong and the others had mounted and were busy waving their sombreros and bowing to the heads and handkerchiefs which were decorating the car windows.

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor, and cheers and good wishes rang out and were replied to by bows and waving of sombreros. Then Hopalong jerked his gun loose and emptied it into the air, his companions doing likewise. Suddenly five reports rang out from the smoker and they cheered the fat man as he waved at them. They sat quietly and watched the train until the last handkerchief became lost to sight around a curve, but the screeching whistle could be heard for a long time.

"Geel!" laughed Hopalong as they rode on after the train, "won't th' fellers home on th' ranch be a whole lot sore when they hears about the good time they missed!"



Peep-Sight Shoots High

By Allan Vaughan Elston

THE PURSUED and the pursuers were no more than half a mile apart. The clear visibility of the thin plateau atmosphere allowed each easily to discern the other. It was too far yet for rifle range, but these weapons were loosened in the scabbards that flapped against the sweating flanks of the mounts.

The woman sitting on the lone butte to the northward watched the pursuit. She could easily count the loping dots. And for this reason it seemed to her somewhat paradoxical to apply the term "pursuit." For the dots ahead numbered seven, and those behind but two. Seven men running away from two?

Of course, she did not know that of the two men behind, one was Peep-Sight Cummings. Had she known this, she would not have counted strength in numbers.

Some ten miles away, in the barroom of the Crystal Grange, sat a man who knew well the personnel of the two parties, the pursued and the pursuers. He knew the fleeing Mexico Simons and every one of his six *compadres*. He knew quite well just what the seven were running away for. But above all, he knew Peep-Sight Cummings. He had, in fact, been one of the few men who had ever been framed in the orifice of that peep-sight that had given Cummings his name, and who had escaped its menace.

The man, the only customer of the barroom on this sleepy Sunday morning, knew every fact worth knowing about the whole affair. He knew that young Ed Cummings, Peep-Sight's son and deputy, was with his father on the trail. He even knew that the young woman was on the lone butte beside the path of pursuit, and he knew just why she was there. But the thing of paramount impor-

tance that the man knew, and which gave him the most complete satisfaction was this: the front sight on the muzzle of Sheriff Cummings's famous Enfield rifle was at the moment just seven thirty-seconds of an inch in height, whereas its normal dimension was a full and accurate quarter.

If Cummings himself had been aware of this detail, he might have adjusted the hitherto infallible peep-sight just ahead of the chamber to have allowed for the shortened front sight. Had he done so, his unerring accuracy at the 800-yard range still might have availed. As it was he missed; and missed again.

"'S the matter, dad?" asked young Ed, to whom the spectacle of his father's missing twice in succession, even at moving targets 800 yards away, was unusual.

"Gettin' old, I guess," answered Peep-Sight; and he fired again and again, and missed.

The stop to shoot had given the quarry a minute, and the range was widened. The pursuers resumed the pursuit, but the old sheriff's heart was out of it by now. His only advantage lay in a long-distance duel, in which few men could hope to cope with him; and the fugitives were now getting on toward the cedar brakes where this advantage would be lost. Peep-Sight had no desire to allow himself and his son to be potted from behind the brakes by a superior force.

Wearily he gave it up.

As they turned back toward town, young Ed took leave of his father. "Well, dad, gettum next time, eh? Too bad the old eye was off this morning. So long. I got me a date if you're through with me."

Ed rode off at right-angles to the trail.

Peep-Sight jogged sadly on toward town. "Wonder was I shootin' too high or too low?" he muttered to himself.

The young woman sitting alone on the high butte to the northward could have answered the old man's question if she had heard it. From her point of vantage, she had seen the bullets bite the dust well ahead of the pur-

sued men. The marksman had overshot.

As a matter of fact, the very accuracy of the old man's bead, drawn on the target against a filed-off front sight, had insured the exactness of the overshooting. A thirty-second of an inch would raise a bullet high in 800 yards. But the young woman had no idea as to the cause of the overshooting. She was simply aware that the overshooting was a fact.

"Must have been cattlemen after rustlers," she said to herself. "It certainly was not Sheriff Peep-Sight. He couldn't shoot like that."

But she was soon to learn that it had been Sheriff Peep-Sight who had done the bad shooting. An hour late to his usual Sunday morning tryst with her, came young Ed Cummings.

"Had to go with the old man after the Simons gang," Ed proffered his alibi as he dismounted. "But dad was off his eye and they got away. I was lucky to get here at all."

At about that moment, Peep-Sight Cummings was riding into town. There he found, as he had found before, that a sheriff's work is never done. At the Crystal Grange he received the news.

"Whitey Stutts has done cleaned us up," informed the bartender. "Stuck up our till about an hour ago, and beat it with all the Saturday night's take-in. Reckon he had the Simons gang show itself to draw you and Ed away, Peep-Sight."

Peep-Sight was a tired man, but this last remark, together with the recent failure, made him angrier than he was tired. Besides, he wanted Whitey Stutts of old. "Which way did he ride, and how?" he asked irritably.

"Northeast on a big roan," answered the bartender. "Had on his usual poker get-up—white hat, yellow vest—you know him."

"Unh-huh," said Peep-Sight, and changed to a fresh horse. "Tell Ed to follow me when he gets in," he called back as he rode northeast.

Thus Peep-Sight was on the trail again. This time it

was an even conflict, one man following one. Peep-Sight had no trouble in picking up the fresh tracks of the big roan, which led on a straight line northeasterly as if the rider had a definite destination. The sheriff followed the trail easily in the clear sunlight of midday.

As he rode, he ruminated on his failure of the morning. He was piqued by it. Peep-Sight was the best long-distance rifle shot in the state. He was known as deadly at 800 yards, whereas few men, even experts, are dangerous at over 600. It was the old man's extreme sureness at long range that made him feared by all the outlaws of the open country.

Peep-Sight dismissed his morning's failure from his mind with the reflection that the sun had been in his eyes. His confidence returned. Right now, the sun was directly overhead and would soon be at his back.

Peep-Sight noted that the trail of the man led directly toward Coffeepot Butte, a low but prominent hogback that alone relieved the flatness of its particular section of desert. The tracks held on unerringly toward the butte. Ahead of him, in the deep sand, Peep-Sight could see the indentations arrive at the foot of the hillock's slope and ascend. He slowed his pace.

The man Stutts might be lying in ambush among the boulders of the butte's summit, to pick him off. Peep-Sight stopped short. Something was moving near the summit of the butte. The sheriff shaded his eyes with his cupped hand and now easily made out the moving object. It was the big roan, Stutts's horse.

A puff of smoke rose from the crest of the butte, and a bullet whirled to the sheriff's left.

The situation was obvious and Peep-Sight grinned. The outlaw had noted his approach and wisely reflected that it was best to fight it out while still behind the shelter of the bouldered butte. Otherwise, if he kept on, Peep-Sight might overtake him on the open flat, where the sheriff's superior long-range shooting would wing him like an antelope.

Peep-Sight estimated the range. Still 1000 yards. He

was safe from Stutt at that range, and even at 800. But if Stutt so much as showed a shoulder at 800, Peep-Sight would get him. The old man advanced a cautious 200 yards.

Peep-Sight dismounted and took position behind his mount. The horse, trained, stood motionless. The old sheriff rested his Enfield across the saddle, and pointed it toward the butte's crest, his steady, desert-practiced eyes scanning the boulders for a glimpse of the man. He expected more shots from the enemy. None came.

Stutt's roan horse was plainly visible on the hillock. Obviously, the man was lying low for Peep-Sight to approach closer. But Peep-Sight had no intention of approaching closer. He could hit as easily at 800 yards as at 600, if he could see anything to shoot at.

His hawk eyes explored every cranny of the rocky ledge at the crest of the Coffeepot, and they at last found their mark. There was the big white hat of the man showing above a boulder. But Peep-Sight was hardly to be fooled by the old hat trick. Hats were often empty. He looked intently at the white hat, and then he saw something else—the glint of a rifle barrel pointing out from the side of the boulder. And, back of the rifle barrel, a flash of yellow—the well-known yellow vest of the gambler, Stutt.

Peep-Sight took longer than his usual aim at that square of yellow vest at the base of the shining rifle barrel. There would be no missing this time. Peep-Sight's rifle was always rigid on the aim, even when its owner was astride a moving horse. Now, standing on firm earth, his weapon supported by a perfect rest, a miss was unthinkable. The sheriff's right eye bored into the orifice of the peep-sight. Through the exact center of that orifice he caught the tip of the front sight. He moved the deadly line of collimation directly and accurately upon its target. No wavering; no uncertainty—a dead bead, as exact as the laws of mathematics. It was Peep-Sight at his best. He couldn't miss.

The Enfield cracked. As the death-dealing bullet left the muzzle, Peep-Sight was entirely confident that it

would find its mark. And his confidence was entirely justified.

The shining rifle of the hidden man left the hands that held it, and pitched forward. It rattled down the slope and tumbled a dozen feet over a sharp pitch. Now it lay well out of the reach of Stutts, even if Stutts still lived to grasp it.

Peep-Sight mounted and loped forward. He kept the Enfield at his shoulder, ready for a trick, ready for the man if he were shamming and possessed another weapon. But, as Peep-Sight drew nearer, he saw that the man was beyond tricks. The head that wore the white hat was limp on the boulder; the form of the man in complete collapse against it. The man's arms encircled the rock; he seemed to clutch at it to keep from falling.

And blood! The man was drenched with it—his face, hands, his yellow vest.

Peep-Sight lowered his rifle. At 20 yards, he saw the man's face through the blood smears. He saw the man's face, and Peep-Sight's own features turned white, as white as the gray hairs above them. For the face of the man collapsed against the boulder, the victim of that deadly peep-sighted aim, was the face of young Ed Cummings.

Peep-Sight tottered to the ground. He hurled the old Enfield savagely from him. Like a crazy man, he stumbled toward the figure of his son, the son he had shot to death.

If remorse could thrust deeper, it did so when the old sheriff arrived beside his boy's body. Tied to the boulder it was, gagged, arms bound around the rock, trussed like a fowl at a turkey shoot.

The old man groaned. To shoot his own son was bad enough—but to shoot him as he lay helpless, stuck up like a bull's eye for the bead of the merciless peep-sight!

Stutts's big roan grazed on the butte. Young Ed's horse was nowhere to be seen. But another horse topped the butte from its other side and bore down upon Peep-Sight. Peep-Sight's eyes, once steady, now bleary, blinked at it. It was Stutts, no doubt, come to get him. Let him.

Peep-Sight was without defense. He didn't care. He turned his back upon the newcomer and cut the bonds from his son.

But the quickly arriving horse did not bear Stutt—upon it was a young woman. She lay in a strained position forward on the horse's neck, hands tied together beneath the throat of the animal, feet tied beneath the cinch.

"Peep-Sight!" the young woman called weakly.

Peep-Sight turned to her. Helplessly he indicated the form of young Ed. "I shot him," was all he could say.

"He's not shot," the young woman cried. "Stutts did it. He knocked him out with a blow on the head. He's only stunned."

But Peep-Sight knew better. "No, no," he repeated, as he now used his knife to slash the tie-ropes from the girl's hands and feet. "I knocked down the rifle that was propped against his cheek."

"No, Stutts did it," the girl insisted. "I saw him. He tied Ed up and dressed him up for you to shoot at. Then he propped the rifle up and took one shot at you himself before he took me with him."

Once free, she ran to Ed and kneeled beside him. Ed's eyes opened and he smiled weakly at his sweetheart. She wiped the blood from his face.

Then she turned again to the dazed Peep-Sight. "Ed probably shoved the rifle away from him in the last struggle before he lost his senses," she said. "You never hit him. Look at your own front sight. Stutts says he filed it down."

Unbelief registered in the eyes of Peep-Sight, but he picked up his cast-off Enfield and mechanically examined the front sight. The examination showed him that it had been tampered with, lacked something of its normal height.

"Then I musta shot too high," he muttered.

"No, not too high, Peep-Sight; just high enough," the young woman answered him. "Look yonder."

Peep-Sight, now on top of the butte, looked over the flat on its farther side, the side from which the young

woman had appeared.

Out on the flat was a riderless horse, Ed's horse. Something, someone, writhed beside it on the ground, writhed in the sand and then was still.

Peep-Sight saw and understood. Justice, in its parabolic flight over the Coffeepot—Justice, whose trajectory a man had sought to corrupt with a mere file—had reached out there to Stutts.



The Ghost of Billy the Kid

By Edwin Corle

THE GHOST of Billy the Kid haunts the Panamint country north of the Slate Range. Of course it is all nonsense because nobody believes in ghosts and Billy the Kid was never in California. But the rumor started and it continues to persist as rumors will.

Billy the Kid, since his death at the age of 21, and his record of chivalry and deadliness (21 men sent to eternity by this youth not counting Mexicans and Indians) has become the Robin Hood of New Mexico. The boy must have had charm and generosity and loyalty, for he has become something of a folk-hero in the half century since his death at the hand of Sheriff Pat Garrett in the Maxwell House at old Fort Sumner in the early 1880's. But he also had a cold eye and a lightning trigger finger that allowed him to empty with accuracy a six-shooter a split second sooner than any other man in the Southwest.

This gift gave Billy a great start in New Mexican history. Several stories of his life have been in print and the more salient facts such as his first killing, the Lincoln County War, the meeting with Governor Lew Wallace, the sensational jail-break in Lincoln, and his final rendezvous with death in that fatal meeting with Pat Garrett when, for the first time in his life, Billy spoke first and shot later—all are pretty generally known.

After The Kid's death there were several absurd rumors to the effect that he had escaped to Mexico, that he was living in disguise in the Pecos Valley, and that he had fled to Arizona. All of these were absolutely groundless and it is an established fact that Billy the Kid is buried at the abandoned military burying ground at old Fort Sumner. The old military post was trail's end for Billy, and any further account of his life is sheer fiction and the em-

broidery of imaginative minds. What, then, of this ghost of Billy the Kid who lives in the Panamint Valley? Is it all a wild yarn with no truth to back it up? Yes, it's a wild yarn, but yet—?

In one of the half deserted mining towns lives an old man whose only name seems to be "The Kid," but whose initials are W. B. And as everyone knows who has been interested in the real Billy, his legitimate name was William Bonney.

This old man is close to 80 and his mind is not as coherent as it might be. His speech rambles. He has a white beard and blue eyes. He is only about five feet eight inches tall and he has very small hands. Those hands are no longer steady, but in spite of that fact he can whip out a six-shooter and put six bullets in a target with astounding speed and accuracy. He won't tell anyone his name, but insists that he has been "The Kid" for 80 years, and "The Kid" he intends to remain. He never mentions Billy the Kid, and never plays upon the idea that he was ever William Bonney. When asked if he has ever visited New Mexico, he says yes, but as it was almost 60 years ago, it seems like another life to him.

When asked what he did in New Mexico, "The Kid" replies that he roamed around, and punched cattle, and worked for some of the big cattlemen of the time. And he always adds, "And I learned how to handle a gun." But at the mention of the Lincoln County War, and Murphy and McSween and Governor Lew Wallace, he says nothing.

It is possible, however, to get this old man to admit that he has been outside the law several times in his life. But he will never be specific about it, and the most he ever says about New Mexico is that "life was pretty fast there in the old days."

Only a few people have associated the Panamint Valley Kid with Billy the Kid, and one of the more curious deliberately mentioned the name of Bob Ollinger to him. Now Bob Ollinger was a bad man of the 1880's and he wanted everybody to know it. He wasn't in trouble with

the law, but he went around with the proverbial chip way out on the edge of his shoulder. He liked to be considered dangerous. Of course such a man was naive and even childish. Billy the Kid had none of the theatrical desperado about him. He had nothing but scorn for Ollinger. And it so happened that when Billy the Kid was in jail in Lincoln under sentence to be hung, Ollinger, and a man named Bell, were his guards. Bell was a decent sort, but Ollinger, who hated The Kid because he was jealous of his reputation, loved to irritate him and to talk about the approaching hanging. Ollinger must have had a sadistic streak, for he kept rubbing it into The Kid about his imminent death on the gallows, and how few days of life were remaining to him, and how he would dance in the air, and how the rope would choke the rotten life out of him, and how his body would stiffen, and how he himself would put a load of buckshot into the remains of The Kid if he had half a chance.

All that sort of thing must have made Billy writhe, but he said little or nothing in reply. But if he said nothing, he did plenty. A few days before the date of the hanging Ollinger was eating his dinner across the street from the jail in Lincoln. That left The Kid with the remaining guard, Bell. There has been much speculation as to how it was done; and some authorities romantically visualize it as over a card game, but by whatever means possible, Billy managed to get Bell's revolver. That was a costly mistake for Bell, and not being shrewd enough to placate The Kid, who bore him no particular malice, he tried to dash out of the room. The Kid, naturally enough, shot him through the heart.

Ollinger, finishing his meal across the street, gulped the remains of a cup of coffee, and went running back to the jail. The room in which The Kid had been confined was the second story of the old court house. And as Ollinger came lumbering across the street, a quiet, "Hello, Bob," stopped him in his tracks. He looked up at the second story window and saw The Kid smiling down at him with a smile that had little good humor in it. And that's the

last thing he ever saw.

Everyone in Lincoln knew the desperado was loose, and no one dared do anything about it. Billy the Kid took the county clerk's horse and rode out of town never to return. The entire episode was perhaps the most sensational jail-break in the history of New Mexico, and certainly a high spot in the vivid escapades of The Kid.

Now if this old man living alone in the Panamint country were the real Billy, the entire Ollinger episode must have remained forever in his memory. So, of course, must his experiences with Sheriff Pat Garrett. But whenever Garrett's name is mentioned the old man fails to express any kind of an emotion or even recognition of the name. It is a discouraging test for anyone who romantically hopes that he has stumbled upon the ghost of a bad man, or who wants to believe that this old man may have been Billy the Kid. And that is just as it should be. For he cannot be the real Billy if the real Billy died over 50 years ago at old Fort Sumner.

But to return to the incident of Bob Ollinger. Apparently only one man ever mentioned Ollinger to this Panamint Valley Kid, and he got a reaction. The old man was sitting in the shade of his little shack which was on a slight rise of ground overlooking a dry wash. He and the stranger were making small talk of sidewinders and gila monsters. Leading the conversation to reptiles in general, the stranger casually said, "I knew a rattlesnake once whose name was Bob Ollinger. Ever hear of him?"

The old man stared at the distant mountains, and very slowly he began to smile. It was a cool and deliberate and extremely satisfied smile. He picked up a revolver that he had been toying with in his lap.

"Now he comes out of the hotel onto the porch," he remarked. "He's lookin' around to see where that first shot came from. He's wipin' the coffee off his mouth with one hand, and he trots across the street toward the jail. Now he's halfway. Now he's right there where that tin can is settin'."

The stranger didn't say a word. He held his breath while

the old man leveled the revolver at a tin can 20 feet away. The old man's hand was steady and his face had a cold, mirthless smile.

"Hello, Bob," he said softly with a slight drawl.

Then he fired and the tin can gave six spasmodic jumps along the ground as six bullets went through it.

"And take that to hell with you," he said, and he put the revolver down beside him.

Then both men were quiet, and the stranger didn't know what to say. But presently the old man scratched the back of his neck.

"Ollinger, did you say?" He was looking blank and the smile was gone. "Ollinger, eh? Nope. Don't recollect that I ever heard of him."

Baldy at the Brink

By Alan LeMay

EBEN WARE, whose ax boldly raised its voice above the moan of the deep-hidden waters, was an old man, too old, almost, to be laboring out there on that slippery granite shoulder, 100 feet above white water. Above him the rock swelled sharply to the crest of the canyon rim, 20 feet up. Just below him it rounded off steeply until it overhung 100 feet of nothing, with the brawling, seething rapids of the Snowbeard River at the bottom.

Swiftly, mechanically, the ax rose and fell. The smack of the biting blade echoed and re-echoed from the monstrous, disordered rock formations that towered over the worker, until the canyon seemed full of unseen axmen.

Eben slipped; the steel of the ax rattled against the granite as he flattened himself on the rock. Cling as he could, only the rope about his waist saved him. Old Pete, at the other end of the rope, hauled on it with an exaggerated flourish, and Eben slowly regained his feet.

"Don't *do* that!" Pete begged. "Yuh gimme the jibbers."

"Ain't goin' t' fall," said Eben, resuming his work.

"Ain't worried about that. Go ahead an' fall. What I'm worried over is the ax. Yuh near dropped it that time. You better take off the rope an' put it on the ax."

There was no reply to this, and Pete's eyes wandered over their situation. Only 60 or 70 feet from where he sat rose the farther wall of the gash from which came the steady dull roar of the old Snowbeard. Only 60 or 70 feet! Yet the gap had never been crossed by man. Upon their ability to span it they were staking a fortune dearer to them than life.

A sort of crumbled notch bit part way into the wall opposite, as if a great stone ax had struck there, ages ago. The 120-foot pine they were cutting overhung the canyon

rim, clinging precariously to the granite shoulder by gripping its roots deep into a great crooked crevice. Its top must lodge in that notch, 70 feet away, if they were to succeed. Elsewhere the canyon walls presented a precipitous barrier, harshly carved on a scale so huge that their tall tree was dwarfed to a match stick, and the men themselves reduced to less than crawling ants.

Eben stiffly climbed the granite bulge. He had been a big man—was yet; but the one-time hulking mass of his shoulders had given way to a lean-carved stoop; and his shirt and coarse pants (he still bought clothes of the size he had worn in his youth) draped loosely on his great gaunt frame.

His face was seamed and battered by the years, but his iron-gray hair was still crinkly and crisp, and though his deliberate, almost awkward movements confessed that he wasn't limber any more, the bit of the ax had swung easily, and struck deep.

Pete's leathery, genial face was sober as he slid down the rock to replace Eben. A warning snap spoke from the almost severed trunk, and Pete, suddenly summoning all his strength, laced into the cut with hurried strokes.

Pete, as old as Eben, was of only moderate height, and had always been spare; hence the years had twisted him less than the bigger man. Under a shag of hair as white as the foam of old Snowbeard his eyebrows lay curiously dark, for they had hardly grayed at all; but his mustache was as white as his forelock.

The great tree swayed with slow majesty, as if a harried giant at last moved to crush his puny foes.

"Jump, you old fool!" yelled Eben, jerking savagely at the rope to swing Pete out of the way.

"Timber she falls!" shouted old Pete.

He leaped away from the toppling trunk, skittering sidewise along the granite with a comedy simulation of terror which he did not feel. Eben waited half a second to see that Pete was comparatively safe; then, as they had agreed, he dropped the rope and scrambled for his life.

From the pine came a savage crackling, as if a hundred

light carbines had unleashed an ill-disciplined volley. A swish of flailing boughs rose to a roar above the voice of the rapids; then the top struck with a resounding boom and a crashing of torn wood. As the huge stem leveled, the butt tore loose from the stump, sprang 10 feet into the air, and bludgeoned down against the granite shoulder. Then at last the fallen tree wedged and lay still.

Their eyes sought each other; then Pete laboriously climbed the rock, and they sat down to rest.

"That's her," said Pete; he spoke loudly that he might be heard above the voice of the deep-laid river. "The hardest part's over, Eben!"

"It's a good thing," answered Eben slowly. "I never see sech walkin' as you led me an' Baldy over last night. No trail, no light, no landmarks. Nothin' but leg-breakin' windfalls, an' steeps, an' brush fit t' stop a moose. How yuh knowed the way beats *me*."

"I didn't," said Pete.

"Wha-at?"

"I never see this place before, except from the far side," Pete chuckled. "I jest guessed at how to come here, an' hit out. I knew yuh'd never come along, if yuh reelized what a slim chance we had o' makin' it."

Eben shook his head slowly, but let it pass. "D'yuh s'pose Fiddlin' Ben's discovery is as rich as he said 'twas, Pete? I know he wouldn't be braggin', just when he was dyin' thataway. But he might o' been mistook, or—"

"Nope," said Pete decidedly. "Ben knew rock. Never was one to overjedge a find, Ben wasn't."

They were silent a bit, weary old men who had traveled all night.

"We was lucky to be with Ben when he cashed in," said Eben. "It shore set me down when he told us about his strike an' begged us to go stake it thataway."

"He only done that to spite Stingaree Shadd," Pete commented, and Eben nodded. "A right mean skunk, that Stingaree. Looks like when Ben told him about the strike, he jest couldn't wait to go get his dirty hooks into it. I jest can't figger a man that'd run out on his own pardner thata-

way, an' leave him dyin' alone. Must be purty stinkin' low, an' that's a fact."

"Reckon Fiddlin' Ben will rest easier in his grave," said Eben, "if we beat out Stingaree."

"He's got thirty hours start," Pete pointed out.

"An' good horses," Eben added, "real good."

"But look," said Pete, sitting up. "He has to go way down to the south through Telegraph Pass. Ain't a soul knows a shorter way to get a horse across old Snowbeard—cept us, an' we wasn't right shore of a way ourself, until that tree struck an' held solid. All we got to do is cross over, an' work out o' the Tall Rock country in two hours. Then Baldy has to push twenty-five miles through the upper meadow country in less'n four."

"An' if she can—"

"We'll beat Stingaree to the strike by a good half day," Pete concluded. "Baldy has a lot o' tough miles in her, Eben, an' I ain't much for her to carry. I'll have time to stake the claim, an' get ready to fight, an' have the upper hand easy. All you got to do is foller along packin' some grub!"

"Sounds good," Eben conceded.

Pete roused himself; they had rested too long already, these aged men.

Eben's great awkward strides as he climbed after Baldy were lighter and more hurried, now. Into the plodding determination of his rocky face had come a keener gleam, and beneath their grizzled brows his flinty gray eyes shone like pin-points of steel.

Pete, too, had changed, but in another way. His movements were quick and sure, but in his face had appeared a peculiar uncertainty, as if he were a little dazed at the success of his own plan. Into Pete, for the first time in many a long year, had crept the shadow of a haunting fear.

Perhaps long forgotten hopes were reawakening in the minds of the old men. All their lives, separately in their early years, and toward the last together, they had sought gold perpetually, cannily, shrewdly. In the long twisting mountain and desert trails they had learned the irony of

perpetual failure, and the bitterness of defeat.

They were near the end of the trail, these two old men. Wealth would mean a secure haven at the end, and a comfortable peace peopled with the memories of their youth.

Now it seemed actually within their grip at last.

Pete gained a foothold upon the opposite rim, having chopped off such branches as interfered. He instantly turned and started back to help Eben with Baldy, but his partner waved him on.

"You find the way through that rock rubbish!" Eben yelled. "I'll fetch Baldy!"

His voice was lost in the growl of the waters 100 feet below, but Pete understood and hurried ahead.

Quickly Eben tightened Baldy's pack cinches, and led her to the granite shoulder. The old pack mare was sure-footed, tough and wise; the short slide on her haunches to the base of the tree offered nothing new to her. A hundred times she had been asked to coast down similar faces, with nothing to stop her but a tiny crevice for her heel calks, and a 1000-foot drop into eternity just beyond. It was all in the day's work to Baldy.

Eben slid down the steep-pitched bulge of the rock to the tree, and started across. He signed to Baldy to follow with encouraging waves of his hand, but he did not so much as glance back to see whether the horse was coming. He had led the way for her time and again, and she always had followed before. He was nearly across the chasm before he noticed that Baldy had not started.

"Yuh old goat, come on!" he yelled, beckoning with a sweeping arm.

Baldy pricked her blue roan ears toward him, and stared with mild eyes. Her broad white Roman nose gave her a sheepish look as she gazed after him from the rock above.

"She'll foller when she thinks she's gettin' left," Eben told himself.

Striding on, he reached the end of the tree, and began to pick his way up through the broken rock masses of the

notch. Pete now appeared, astonishingly far above upon an outstanding point. After looking downward for a moment like a scouting fox, Pete began to shout something, and wave his hands. Eben turned to see what was the matter behind.

He suddenly broke into furious cursing. Baldy, instead of following, had disappeared.

With jaw grimly set, Eben hurried back across the fallen tree at a bent-legged shamble. Below, 100 feet down, old Snowbeard bounded and swirled; here the waters arched in furious swells like the backs of great bounding cats; there gouts of foam perpetually shot into the air from the watery battle with submerged rocks. To a man of the flat country 100 feet might have seemed a dizzy drop, but to Eben, accustomed to mountain chasms and precipices, the Snowbeard was just another creek, running along a few feet below.

Far ahead, up a shallow cut so unmercifully steep that he touched the ground with his hands as he climbed, he could see Baldy's blue-gray haunches, the muscles swelling as the horse toiled upward.

"What the dingdoodle!" Eben marveled. So far as he could see, there was no earthly reason why any horse should go up such a formidable wash. At the top, he knew, there would be nothing but barren tables, a maze of chasmic cracks and a jumble of upthrust rock. He had never known Baldy to show so little sense before, yet there the old fool went, toiling up the futile steep as purposefully as if she were going somewhere.

He yelled at her at the top of his lungs, so loudly that his old voice cracked; and Baldy, swinging her sheep-like face around to look back, stopped and waited.

Leading Baldy none too gently, Eben returned to the granite shoulder on the canyon rim. He slacked off the lead rope as he reached the final steep, and slid down ahead of the horse to the butt of the tree. There he turned and tried to pull Baldy after him.

Deliberately, firmly, Baldy balked.

Eben braced himself and pulled. He yelled, he wrapped

his long legs about the horizontal trunk and heaved. It was of no use. The animal's shod hoofs slipped a little, inducing her to a mad scramble for footing, but that was all.

Striding angrily across the tree came Pete. "Git out of the way, yuh long-legged old fool! Can't yuh handle a hoss yet? Gimme that lead rope!"

Eben surrendered the rope without argument. "Did yuh find the way out o' the notch?"

"I done so!" exulted Pete, momentarily diverted. "It all come back to me, jest like nothin'. Baldy can get through slick. We're a-goin' to beat him, boy!"

They precariously edged past each other on the smooth tree bole, Eben taking the lead.

Pete spoke comfortingly to the horse above. "'Sall right, Baldy. Pete's here. Ne'mind that stilty old fool that's been haulin' at yore head. Here we go now. Jest foller Pete."

Tugging gently at the lead rope, merely as a hint of what he wanted, he turned his back on the horse, and made as if to cross. Baldy stood fast.

Pete looked back over his shoulder. "Come on, Baldy. 'Sall right, I tell yuh! Come with Pete, now!" He increased the tugs on the rope without effect.

"Yuh done it now!" Pete turned fiercely on Eben. "Yuh yanked an' hauled at her until yuh got her scared!"

"I started jest as easy as you done," Eben replied testily. "What's got into her? Is there somethin' about this riggin' we don't see?" He uneasily examined the lie of the fallen tree.

"She was born an' raised on worse footin' than that log," Pete spat out, his temper betraying his nervous strain. "There's no use her pertendin' any differ'nt. Yuh yanked at her, that's what yuh done!"

Eben started to reply hotly, but restrained himself. "All right. Take her over, if yo're so whoopin' smart!"

Pete scrambled up to where Baldy stood, and quietly led her away from the crossing. Slowly, though with trembling hands, he rearranged the pack, loosening the cinches, tightening them again, talking casually to the

horse as he worked. Finally he gave her a bit of sugar; and with a great air of casualness, endeavored to lead her on to the log. The result was no better than before.

"All right, Baldy. We'll jest leave you to forage by yoreself. Come on, Eben. We're goin' to leave Baldy behind." He looped her lead rope on to her pack again, and started purposefully across the log. "So long, Baldy."

Without once looking back the two men strode across the log, and began to climb the ragged slope. Not until they were 100 yards above the fallen tree did they stop behind a huge slab of rock. Cautiously they peered back—

"She ain't comin'!" exclaimed Pete. "She ain't nowhere!"

"See?" said Eben. "Same way she done with me!"

Abandoning their futile subterfuge, they dashed incontinently down the rock slides and across the tree. Eben hurried straight to the steep, unpromising gully in which he had found her before. The crooked wash twisted away upward into a wilderness of granite and barren, massive havoc. But, far above, their eyes found it where it reappeared.

"No hoss would go up there," Pete snorted.

"Is that right?" sneered Eben. "Well, there she is, anyway!"

Far above they could now see Baldy, climbing busily.

"Well, fer the lo-ove o' forty million yaller snakes!" exclaimed Pete.

With one accord they raised their cupped hands to their mouths and shouted upward until the rock masses rang with their cracked old voices. Baldy heard, looked around, and stopped.

Many minutes later they reached her, where she stood waiting for them to come up. Back down they went, to try new tactics. Once more they tried to divert Baldy's mind, and lead her in peace to the brink. But this time Eben remained behind her, and it was a slip noose about her throat, instead of her usual halter shank, with which Baldy was led.

At a given signal Pete threw his weight upon the rope, and Eben set his shoulder to her haunches and pushed

with all his strength.

Baldy sat down, her four feet braced; then her iron-shod hoofs slipped on the steep rock, and she began the 15-foot slide down the shoulder to the tree. Pete slacked off on the rope as Baldy was seen to be unable to stop herself, and Eben recovered his balance. One of Baldy's front feet found a tiny crevice, and she checked a little; then Pete hauled on the rope again, and Baldy slid on.

Suddenly, as the rope slacked again, Baldy made a last frantic resistance. Pawing madly for the crevice her foot had found, she turned herself half around, scrambling desperately to get back up the bulge of rock.

Terror leaped in the eyes of the two old men. If Baldy should miss her footing, their horse would in a few seconds be a broken thing, rolling and tossing down the canyon in the clutch of old Snowbeard, 100 feet below. There seemed only one chance to save her—by turning her head once more to the fallen tree that meant secure footing. Swiftly Pete took up the slack of the rope and pulled.

The pull loosened Baldy from what foothold she possessed, but failed to turn her head. Scrambling in utter panic she slid down the granite bulge hind feet first, while both men held their breath. Slowly, inch by inch it seemed, Baldy slipped down that treacherous shoulder. Her feet were wide flung, her belly low to that steepening, almost vertical bulge, as she fought frantically to save herself.

Pete yelled, and flung the rope with all his strength toward Eben, who could have saved her, perhaps, from above. But the rope fell short, and the loose end flung itself like a leaping snake into the canyon below.

Then one of Baldy's hind feet found the butt of the tree, and she instantly flattened herself against the curve of the rock and became still.

Had she made a further effort to save herself now she must certainly have slipped over the shoulder into the warring rapids of the Snowbeard, down there below. The wise old horse, however, made no further move, but lay still upon her belly, waiting for the men to figure it out.

Speaking gently, moving by inches, the men ap-

proached. Eben secured the long rope, retied it with swift fingers, that it might strangle her no more, and went with it to the top of the shoulder. There he sat down with his feet braced against an irregularity in the rock, and prepared to fight gravity to the last of his strength.

His partner, cheekbones flushed above the cottony white of his mustache, slowly unfastened Baldy's pack, and managed to push its component parts to safety on the lesser slopes above. Then he joined Eben, and they began a tug of war against space.

"Come on Baldy!"

Together they heaved on the rope, and with a wild scramble Baldy came up the slippery rock to safe footing once more.

There was no congratulation in their eyes as the two men looked at each other.

"We've done it now," said Pete. "Baldy'll never cross that stick."

"She's got to cross it," answered Eben doggedly. "We'll blindfold her, an' get her on it!"

"It's the only chance," Pete agreed; but he shook his head hopelessly. "Let's tie her here, an' tote the pack stuff over first. It'll leave her time to steady, some."

They loaded themselves with the great blob-like bundles from Baldy's pack, and, leaving Baldy tied to a tiny bush this time, walked steadily across the moaning abyss. Two trips were necessary before everything was across. As they rested for a moment on the farther rim, Pete looked at his watch, and turned solemn eyes on his lank partner.

"Gettin' on toward our last chance, Eben."

The endless fooling with the stubborn horse had consumed far more time than they would have believed, even while their impatience made each delay seem long.

"What time is it?"

"Most noon," said Pete. "Our half-day's leeway is purty near gone. It'll be a hoss race, now, Eben."

They turned toward the tree again with the resolute movements of men who make a last grim bid for fortune.

Suddenly Eben's eyes blazed.

"Baldy's gone!" he jerked out. "She's pawed off her hackamore!"

Pete snapped a fierce glance over the looming topography opposite them.

"There she goes up that damn' gully," he spat out. "We ain't got no more time to lose. Git across there, Eben!"

Leaping and sliding, they plunged downhill toward the tree. Eben, racing in the lead with great plunging strides, rocketed among the upper branches, gained his balance by seizing an upstanding limb, and ran out along the trunk. Pete was close at his heels.

Cra-ack! One of the limbs that had braced the fallen tree top sagged and gave way, letting the top end of the trunk drop a foot, then another. Eben slipped, and his feet shot downward toward the frothing rocks and waters below. His long arms snatched instinctively for the trunk, and for a moment he dangled 100 feet above the Snow-beard.

Crack! The trunk gave downward a little more, turning as if deliberately trying to drop the old man into the canyon's snarling space.

Pete flung himself out of the tree top to safe ground. "She's going, Eben! Git back! Git back!"

Steadily, almost deliberately, Eben clambered back on to the trunk. It seemed to his partner that his movements were incredibly slow as he strode back along that slowly rolling, slipping log toward safety. *Crack-crack!* The tree jolted downward another foot, and Eben almost fell.

"For God's sake—Eben!"

With a great leap and a scramble Eben got his feet on solid ground. A limb, twisted by the slow, increasing movement of the great tree, snapped upward and over, knocking the tall man down. Frantically Pete dragged Eben clear of the tangle.

Crack! One last restraining limb snapped. Then the butt, braced against the granite shoulder beyond the chasm, was twisted free and sprung upward, stabbing at the hills beyond. The top rolled clear, and the tree

plunged downward with a mighty splintering roar into the turmoiled waters far below. A spout of foam leaped into their vision from beneath, and a hissing wail came into the voice of old Snowbeard.

The two old men stared back across the gap that they would never cross again; and the thought of the death that they had so narrowly escaped was already gone from their minds.

"Wonder," said Eben tonelessly, "why she was so crazy to get up that gully. Wasn't no sense to it, Pete. Mebbe she's gettin' old, Pete, old an' crazy, like us."

"She run wild in this country once," Pete answered, his voice dull. "Mebbe she throwed a colt up there somewhere's. It pulls 'em back, Eben."

They gazed drearily across the chasm, weary old men, their taxed endurance vanished with their broken dreams.

Pete was first to wrench himself into action. From one of the bundles he tore a cartridge belt.

"I'm goin' to make a run for it," he said dryly. "I guess I still got 25 miles under my belt. It's easy walkin', once I make the upper meadows."

Eben did not reply for a moment. He accepted as natural that they should yet fight for Fiddlin' Ben's discovery.

"Not much hope, Pete," he said slowly.

"Nope."

"It would've been a hard ride to make, even with Baldy."

"Yep."

"I b'lieve we could o' made it, if that tree'd stayed put."

"Mebbe Stingaree's hoss," said Pete grimly, "has broke a leg, or somethin'."

"He had three, though," Eben recalled.

Pete made no reply. Instead of putting on the cartridge belt he had taken the revolver out of the heavy holster and stuck it in his waistband. He hastily extracted a handful of cartridges from the belt, and put them loose in a pocket. He could afford no extra weight, this old man who was going to try 25 rough miles in an afternoon, without food since 18 hours before, and without rest for 30.

"I dunno as I can make the distance," said Eben, falling in behind Pete, who was already starting up the notch.

"Don't try," said Pete over his shoulder as he climbed. "We'll lose if yuh do! Stay here an' rest an' eat, an' when yuh get some stren'th, foller along with some grub. I'll shore need it, by then!"

"You better take some with yuh!" Eben called after him.

"Gotta piece bread in my pocket. I'll eat it on the way. Can't carry nothin' more!"

He cocked his hat to one side and clowned a stumble, gamely humorous to the last.

Eben sat down wearily on a boulder, and ran a gaunt hand through his crinkled, iron-colored hair. For 15 minutes or so he watched the wiry figure of old Pete climbing steadily up the notch. When Pete had disappeared he roused himself, and built a little fire. He had little enough appetite, but he must eat if he were to follow Pete with the grub.

When he had eaten he felt a little better. He had not realized before how hungry and tired he was. The moments lengthened, until an hour had passed since the tree had plunged into the canyon carrying with it their hopes. It was time for him to go on.

If only he had a horse, it would not be too late even now. Baldy was no race horse, but she was tough, and could gallop many a good mile. It would be a race, but there would be a chance. It's all a man asks—just the off chance.

Something moved on the high skyline a quarter of a mile away up near the top of the notch. Some big animal—a horse, a wild one, most like. It seemed to be surveying the notch, as if looking for its kind. Suddenly Eben sprang up as he detected something familiar in the way the horse stood.

Wildly, clutching at a crazy hope, the old man shouted up the notch. "Baldy! Baldy!"

The horse turned and looked down. Even at that distance Eben could make out the broad white face against

the dark hide.

"How—where—" gasped Eben, racing and scrambling upward over the jagged stone. "It ain't—it can't be—"

But it was true. Baldy, who knew that country as no man could, had preferred to choose her own way across old Snowbeard.

She waited quietly as Eben came up.

The Limber-Pine Squatters

By William Byron Mowery

IN A DROGUE of cottonwoods 11 big white prairie schooners were drawn up for a late noon camp. Behind them a corduroy road stretched across a strip of muskeg. A few steps away from the sway-back wagons a little knot of men leaned against saplings, smoking, talking, waiting for the womenfolk to get dinner ready.

The fresh stumps of four dozen trees, the muddy clothes of the men, their grimy faces and famished looks told of a three-hour battle with the bog. They had filled brush in the hungry mud, planked it with logs and snaked the wagons cautiously across the amphibious road.

It was a new trail they were making, through a virgin prairie wilderness. They were not homesteaders pushing into survey land with a railroad creeping up behind them; they were the squatters preceding them, the pioneers of pioneers, venturing into a country that was still the land of the fur trader, of buffalo herds stretching to the horizon, of Blackfoot, Cree, and Sioux bands roving their ancestral plains and foothills.

In the middle of the knot of men stood a scarlet-jacketed trooper, a Northwest Mounted Policeman with two stripes to his chevron. He was an ordinary wholesome chap of 26, perhaps a little harder-bitten, a little darker sunburned than the other men. He was clean-shaven, lithe and a perfect saddle-fit for Bang, his big roan gelding.

For the last 100 miles across the prairie Corporal Arnold Wolfe had been guide, friend, protector of the squatter caravan. He had guided them to sweetwater camps in pasturing prairies. He had brought in buffalo calves and antelope across his saddle for fresh meat.

As they bit deeper and deeper into Blackfoot territory

and on clear days caught a white glimmer of the distant Rockies, the presence of the red-coated *chee-mog-in-ish* (policeman) was a safeguard against the fierce resentment of the Indian tribes not yet reduced to law and order.

His easy-going nature, his boyish grin and, most of all, the sacrifices that he put himself to for their comfort and safety had endeared Wolfe to the whole group.

It was at his own request that he had been assigned by his inspector to the duty of helping this caravan get wherever they wanted to go. For Wolfe had a certain secret scheme of his own concerning these emigrants. They made possible the thing he had been planning for the last two years.

On a stump near by sat Adoniram Blair, the black-haired leader of the train. A minister he had been back in Minnesota, and ministerial he still was in spite of a hairy face and muddy clothes and his driving an ox team. As he scraped mud off his leather trousers he softly hummed the marching song, the Marseillaise of the tented wagon: "*Theh is one moh rivuh to cr-oo-oo-ss—*"

"You're all wrong, Blair!" Wolfe chuckled, interrupting the doleful prophecy. "There's no more rivers to cross a-tall. We've just licked the last brute, we have."

He pointed his pipe-stem westward toward a sawtooth range of blue hills, and raised his voice so that the women-folk could hear him.

"I've been holding back a little surprise," he went on. "If I'd told you we was all this close, you men 'ud have been out frolicking after buffalo and antelope instead of humping right along so's to get the spring crops in.

"See them hills? See them white flashes covering the slopes? Silver birches! Birch Hills! See them dark green wigs on top the hills? Limber-pines; you're in the limber-pine country now! Only thirty-eight miles in a crow line to Birch Hills and the prairie's solid and level as a table. We'll be there tomorrow night."

His announcement was a blast of gunpowder. One man came to his feet with a yell that knocked a magpie off a

near-by cottonwood. The rest of the men, whirling up their hats, danced a Cincinnati hornpipe.

In the glad smiles of the women, as they looked up from the dinner fires, there was an ever deeper joy; a great throb of thankfulness that the long weary trek was almost over.

In a little grassy meadow beyond the cottonwoods the horses and yoke oxen were pasturing, with buffalo birds hopping up and down their backs picking off flies. Near them were a dozen milch cows, calves frisking beside them. Four boys, each with a Poland China shote tied securely by a hind leg, were allowing their white grunners to root for starchy bulbs under the cottonwoods.

Three little girls in gingham and tight pigtailed were marshaling a waddling file of geese and ducks down to water. Blair's daughter, a prim lass of 17, had lined up a dozen impatient urchins on a log.

"If James had thirteen apples and gave Thomas four—" the query came to Wolfe's ears.

Inside and out, the hooded wagons groaned with their burden, for they were freighting a civilization across the prairie. Inside were spinning wheels and precious seed grain, furniture and homespun clothes, schoolbooks and long-barreled rifles; underneath were the plows, bar iron, wire for fences, crates of chickens and gobbling turkeys, and brush hounds of the old Kentucky lineage.

When dinner sounded several of the men asked Wolfe to their "table," but instead he quietly stepped over to a fire where a woman and three children ate alone. The woman hard of face, red-haired and 40 years old, bade him welcome.

For each of ten wagons there was a man, a father and husband, but none for the eleventh. 500 miles back toward Winnipeg Martha McRory had buried her husband. But indomitable, self-dependent, she had refused to go south to the railroad at Fargo and return to her kin.

The Widow McRory had her strong points: she could drive her own wagon; do a man's work and a woman's,

too, on the trail; and her two boys of twelve and girl of ten were sturdy, "minding" youngsters.

But she was stubborn, domineering, and had a tongue like a blacksnake whip. Not a man in the outfit dared contrary her; she was a man-tamer if ever there was one. During the earlier part of the trip the men privately had nicknamed her husband "Yes Marthy."

"Just over that middle hill way yonder, Mrs. McRory," Wolfe remarked, salting a crisp buffalo placotte, "is Seth Gunnis's farm-ranch. He's the only squatter in fifty miles. Been there four years and is comfortably fixed. 'It'll be some little time before you'll have a cabin up, so I'm going to take you to the Gunnises. Eleanor—that's his daughter—'ll be mighty glad to have you till you get squared away."

She thanked him warmly. Beneath her self-confidence Wolfe was sharp enough to see a hidden fear of the future. She was doubting her ability to battle single-handed against the terrific odds ahead of her. Pioneering was not for man alone nor woman alone, but for man and woman working hard together.

As he amused the two boys with prairie lore and Indian stories and told them of his great trek out across the plains three years before, in 1874, with Colonel French's first column of policemen, he kept looking at Mrs. McRory, thinking deeply. A shrewd smile played about the corners of his mouth.

The party had eaten dinner and the animals were being hitched to the wagons again, when one of the men drew attention to a suspicious object two miles southwest on the prairie. Several swore it was an elk. Wolfe focused his glasses.

"Indian on a *shaganappi* cayuse," he commented. A minute later, "It's Back Fat, a Stony that scouts for me once in a while. He is surelee putting his hind foot in front of his nose. Wonder what's on his mind?"

Just beyond rifle shot the Stony reined up his cayuse and made an elaborate gesture of peaceful intentions. Wolfe signed him to come on in. The Indian galloped up

and jumped off face to face with the corporal. He was a middle-aged warrior wearing only trousers and moccasins, riding his pony barebacked and guiding it by a grass rope tied to its under jaw.

"Back Fat has a story to tell," Wolfe said in the North Sioux dialect. "My ears are long. Speak."

With hands and coppery features and guttural voice the Stony told his terse story. As he listened, Wolfe's face went white and whiter and he bated his breath till the tale was done.

"Lord!" he breathed, as the whole ominous situation burst upon him. "I might have knowed it 'ud come sometime!"

He jabbed questions at Back Fat till he knew beyond doubt that the Indian had seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears all that he had reported.

For the last two years Wolfe had dreaded—dreaded and expected—the thing which had come to pass now. A fear clutched him. He could never get to Birch Hills in time. Even if he did, he could no more stop the tragedy than he could blow back a prairie fire with his breath. But there was only one thing he could do—go and try.

"Back Fat," he ordered the Indian, "you ride like wolf-chased antelope to Big Chief Patterson; tell him I ask send five yellow-stripe *chee-mog-in-ish* to guard these walking teepees. You be guide."

He whirled to the white men. "One of you cinch up my gelding in two shakes. I've got to tear away and leave you. Blair, come here."

He took the emigrant leader aside and spoke in an undertone. "Soon as I get gone, Blair, draw the wagons out of these cottonwoods. Throw 'em together on the open prairie. Tail out sentries tonight. You probably won't be molested, but you don't dare take chances. You'll have a new guard here by tomorrow morning. Don't move till I return. I'll be back tomorrow—mebbe."

A score of times in the last three years Wolfe had made the 75-mile trip from his post to Birch Hills. "Pony parties"

among the Piegans and Bloods sometimes called him, for the law of mine and thine had not yet been firmly impressed upon the tribes. The border, the "Medicine Line" that stopped pursuit, was temptingly near for escape after theft or crime.

Rustlers, outlaws, "forty-rod" traders had brought him on several quick trips. Oftener still he had snatched a three-day furlough and made the trip for reasons that had nothing to do with Indian or outlaw or "forty-rod" peddler. But never had he covered that strip of alkali country as he covered it that April afternoon.

His powerful roan gelding knew their destination. He seemed to sense a tragedy impending, as if he had understood the Stony's fraught message. With never a touch of whip or spur it settled into a steady dead run, as fast as horseflesh could hold for 38 long miles.

The range of hills, his goal, looked tantalizingly close across the buffalo flats. So clear was the air, so level and deceptive the prairie, it seemed that a long rifle could throw a bullet against the lower terraces where the grizzlies came down to eat skunk cabbage.

But for three solid hours the hills retreated in front of him, keeping their distance, mocking his desperation. They merely rose a little out of the plains. Their sawtooth outline grew a little clearer. Their blue haze resolved itself into a patchwork of colors—the black of fire-swept slopes, the jagged brown of avalanche paths, the green of conifers and the white of lingering snow fields on the high limber-pine levels. But the hills themselves danced away from him, retreating toward the faraway, high white horizon of the mighty Rockies.

The prairie, newly freed of snow, had quickened into a blaze of colors. The bitter-salad sprinkled it with dust of gold. Crocuses, bellflowers, and the tiny prairie lily had pushed up with the new green blanket of buffalo grass. The warmth of an Oregon chinook was in the air.

Small bands of buffalo dotted the plains on every side and barely trundled out of the path of the galloping horse.

They were but the forerunners of a vast rumbling army pushing up from the Montana badlands; an army which would eat up all the grass and trample the prairie lakes into muddy wallows.

Great elk, looking for all the world like a horse and rider, watched him from the brown of gentle swells. White-rumped antelope, the fur-trader's "cabbry," flashed up from behind clumps of vetches and left the fleet Bang standing still in his tracks. Foxes that were sly glints of color; coyotes abroad in daylight; eagles hanging in the sky overhead; lakes with alkali like snow around the edges; the air spicy with scent of sage—it was a Black-foot paradise.

Toward evening when the purple shadows were lengthening, the prairie began to tilt upward to the foot of the hills, a gentle slope but heart-breaking after a dead run of 30 miles. It put Bang to a grilling test and the noble mount showed its mettle. The rhythmic *cluppety-cluppety* of hoof on hard sod slowed not a bit in spite of grade.

They topped the first ridge at last, and on the crest Wolfe drew rein a merciful moment to let Bang breathe.

Below them lay a little creek valley which swelled here into a basin, a fertile prairion of several hundred acres. On the day when he first laid eyes upon that basin, a land hunger was born in Wolfe's soul; and since that day he had dreamed of the farm-ranch he was going to build there.

It was a spot of virgin loveliness. Through the long summer days it was wrapped in a slumberous, peaceful haze; hills crowned with the limber-pine locked it in from the woolly-whippers of winter. From these hills one could see the illimitable prairie sweeping eastward; to the west, the majestic, eternal peaks of the Rockies, colored in the morning sun a beautiful pink-white like the inside of a seashell.

All things beckoned him. The blue-water creek running through the basin was alive with trout; the loamy soil was two feet thick; the slopes were covered with white pine

and cedar for building, with lodge-pole birch for fences; in the rabbit thickets berries hung in gorgeous clusters; game in abundance teemed all around him, from the dusky grouse to the bison and grizzly.

It seemed to him the wild grass here grew higher, the prairie rose smelled sweeter, the blue vault of heaven came down nearer and rested on the rim of hills.

In June his Police term would be up; he would have the hard-earned dollars of two years' service to start his farm-ranch. He liked the service well enough, but its future existence was a big question. The land hunger had seized him and he knew there was nothing as solid as Mother Earth to tie to.

These eleven tented wagons of emigrants meant fellow humans to associate with; they were the cap sheaf on the basin's many blessings. Without them the limber-pine country would have been too utterly lonely to live in. But it seemed that the basin was not to be his; for just when his shrewd schemes had removed all obstacles to it, came Back Fat with his message that set up the greatest barrier of all.

He urged the gelding down across the basin and up the game trail to the next crest, when he looked down into a broad river valley, the goal of the tented wagons.

A thousand yards below him lay the Gunnis farm-ranch. A four-room T cabin, a long log barn, a warm hay-shed for the milch cows, a pole corral, a wolf-proof pen for sheep and pigs and calves. ricks of birch and aspen firewood. Worm-rail fences enclosed five fields for cultivation. Across the river lay the wild hay meadows and pasture land.

A flock of horses and Red River cows—small, crumpled-horned, rugged cattle that could lick anything short of a grizzly—were splashing across the river together, coming home in the twilight. No danger of these animals straying; they knew death lurked in the foothills all around them; they were bound to man, their master, by the tie of protection. On all four sides the farm-ranch was circled by

a wide black firebreak, a guard against the yellow prairie fiend.

Everything indicated a squatter's holding prosperous and solid on its feet after its pioneer battle against the wilderness.

"You've done your part, Bang," Wolfe said fervently. "We got here first, thank God! The rest is all in my hands."

The sound of hoofbeats brought a girl to the cabin door; a flaxen-haired, slender girl of hardly 20. As she recognized the rider she uttered a little cry of joy and surprise and flung open the door.

"Why—Arnold—"

Wolfe swung out of the saddle and clasped the small brown hand she held out to him. With half an eye an observer could have seen a quiet understanding between the trooper and the girl; a deep and strong affection.

"Where's the dad, Eleanor?" he asked, looking past her into the hearth room of the cabin.

"Down at the barn, Arnold."

He looked around at the barn and sheds. No one was in sight. "In that case—" said he, and drew her gently to him.

Her arm went around his neck, and she stood on tiptoe to return his kiss. At the creak of a barn-door hinge they separated hastily.

Eleanor looked past him at the gelding; she was quick to read the signs. "Why, Arnold, Bang is all in a lather! Just look how tired he is. What on earth made you ride him so fast?"

"Wasn't I coming to see you?" he evaded her question. He forced a cheerfulness into his voice and hid his throbbing anxiety. "Besides, good news travels fast—or ought to; and I brought you the best in the world, girl. I know how lonely you've been here these four years, the only white woman in fifty miles. But that's all done and over with. Right now, within forty miles of here, there's eleven families of emigrants with twenty-one women and girls among them! Think of that, Eleanor!"

"But I heard of that party, Arnold; they're going north—to Fort MacLeod."

"They were going north," he corrected her. "But when I took charge of 'em, I told 'em—and it's the truth, isn't it?—that these Birch Hills beat that up-country all hot and hollow. I turned 'em in this direction. That's why I asked Inspector Patterson to let me guide 'em. They're coming here! They'll be a regular population, girl! They've even got a pretty young schoolmarm and enough kids for a five-bench school right now. They've got a minister—and we'll certainly need one around here. They've got all the trappings, bag and baggage, of a white man's settlement."

She clapped her hands in a rush of uncontrollable joy. Bravely, in the long months and years, she had fought to hide her longing for the company of white women. Her loneliness was not the loneliness of the homestead woman with neighbors only a few miles away; it had been the isolation of the squatter's woman with a trading post 100 miles distant and only an occasional Blackfoot squaw to remind her that she was not utterly alone in a world of men.

Her gladness was so touching that Wolfe swore to shield her now from any inkling of the tragedy that hovered over the valley. "I want to have a little confab with the dad, Eleanor," he hinted. "I'll be riding off right away—on patrol business—but I'll be back here shortly."

Leading the gelding he turned away from her and met her father halfway between the barn and the house, just beside the hay-shed.

Seth Gunnis was a square-built, square-jawed man in his hardest-boiled forties. Bulldog stubbornness was written all over his blunt features. He was perverse by nature, and his isolated years as a squatter in the limber-pine hills had doured his temper and made him still more cantankerous.

He was hard and cross-grained as a gnarled timber-line hemlock. His very boot came down with an emphatic thump as he walked. When he "took a thing into his head"

the proverbial hell and high water could not swerve him. But, worst fault of all, he was always thinking the worst of people.

At times Wolfe thought the man was cussedness itself all through, without a redeeming spark of common humanity. He had absolutely none of Wolfe's sociability, easy-going fellowship, and deep faith in his fellow humans.

He had no time at all for the corporal. In his belief Wolfe was trying to persuade Eleanor to leave him. He needed his daughter, needed her desperately. No lone man could stick it out there in the Birch Hills. Without Eleanor caring for the cabin, the poultry, the milch cows, doing the housework, nursing him through rheumatism and other ills—without Eleanor's help the farm-ranch would break him.

He did not know that they had promised each other two years ago. He did not know, being blind to high motives, that they had sacrificed their happiness for his sake. Eleanor was loath to leave her father there by himself, and Wolfe was unselfish enough not to urge her. Two years had slipped by—two precious, irreclaimable years of their young lives.

As he held out his hand, Wolfe saw that the squatter had flared up in anger about something; he would not even shake hands. Wolfe shrewdly guessed that he had seen the kiss, a minute before, at the door of the cabin.

With a premonition of trouble ahead with the angry squatter, he started in as delicately as he knew how. Twilight was falling; the precious moments were flitting.

"Mr. Gunnis, you remember you had ten head of cattle killed in March. I thought it was the work of grizzlies coming out hungry during that March chinook. But you thought—you told a couple traders, an H. B. man and several Bloods—that the South Pieigans had killed your stock—"

"You can argue grizzlies till you turn blue in the face," Gunnis interrupted. "I know it was them damned South

Piegans. Pretty Duck's outfit."

"Three days ago," Wolfe continued calmly, "five young bucks came here and asked you to put up proof they'd killed your cattle, or else take it back. They left their guns in the cottonwoods, like we ordered them to do whenever they approach a white man's house. They tried to settle the matter peacefully. You mebbe—you see, dealing with Indians and being in these hills by yourself—you mebbe shouldn't have got your rifle and mossed 'em away with a muzzle against their backs. You mebbe—considering how easy an Indian takes offense and how hot-headed these young South Piegans are—you mebbe shouldn't have kicked Pretty Duck's younger brother—"

"See here, you," Gunnis blazed angrily, "did you come clear down here to tell me what I'd ought an' oughtn't to do or how to 'tend to my business? If you did, just keep your gib to yourself an' get back where you come from. I'll handle these varmints in my own way. I've handled 'em four years now."

Wolfe could have told him that half a dozen times in those four years the Police had stood between him and the revenge of Blackfeet sub-chiefs whom he had angered. His self-confidence about handling Indians was plain ignorance of the truth.

"The point is," Wolfe went on patiently, "that kick was a deadly, personal insult to an Indian. If you'd shot one of 'em, it wouldn't have been a tenth as bad—you know their queer feelings about insults, and you know their queer ideas about blood relationships—do something to me and you do it to my whole totem."

"Pretty Duck's outfit was stirred up even before these five young bucks got back with their story. One of my scouts was at their camp; he saw what happened; he brought me hot word. The Piegans are going to tear down your fences, kill every last hoof of stock for you, burn these buildings and blot this place out completely. They're going to kill you because of that insult, and the Lord above knows what they'll do to Eleanor. Pretty Duck and

twenty warriors are on their way here right now!"

Seth Gunnis went white about the lips. The ominous news struck him hard; no doubt of that. But Wolfe, knowing how perverse and exasperating he could be, was a long way from confident.

"I may be able to turn Pretty Duck back," he concluded. "I know the trail they're coming on. I'll meet him. If you'll sign a paper for me to read to 'em, saying your cattle-killing charge was hasty and that you'll apologize to the young buck you kicked—if you'll merely do that I'll take the rest on my shoulders. Only, we can't waste a minute—"

"But look 'ere," Gunnis interrupted stubbornly, "them South Pieigans did kill them ten head of cattle. I stood on my rights when I mossed 'em off'n my place with a gun."

"All right," Wolfe agreed quickly. "Let that go. The point is, they're going to murder you and burn your homestead. Our only chance is for you to do what—"

Gunnis smacked a fist into his palm. "D'you know what you're askin', you? Askin' me to say they didn't kill them cattle when I know damn' good an' well they did! Askin' me to backwater for a pack of varmints!"

"For God's sake, man," Wolfe pleaded, checking his exasperation, "I'm asking you to save your life and Eleanor's and everything you've got to your name. It's dusk already—in three hours it will be dark—they're waiting back in the hills right now. Give me the paper. That's all you got to do. I'll meet 'em. I'll do the talking. I'll take the danger."

Gunnis deliberated a moment. With him deliberation meant finding a reason to bolster up his opinion. His scare had already passed. Very plainly Wolfe saw that he had some crazy, perverse idea in the back of his head. What that notion was he could not fathom.

"Go on an' meet your friend Pretty Duck," the squatter rapped. "Tell 'im the next time one of his Pieigans sets a foot on my land, I'll put the gun to 'im forthwith! Me scared of that pack? They'll squat up on one of these

hills tonight an' shoot their guns an' yell a few times an' then high-tail it home. That is, if they show up at all."

For a moment Wolfe was knocked speechless. His plan and only hope to save the farm-ranch, to stop the tragedy of the coming night, was exploded by Gunnis's hard-headedness.

"Lord above!" he cried in desperation. "You mean you don't believe—?"

Gunnis shook a fist under his nose. The perverse idea in the back of his head came suddenly to words. "D'you think I can't see through your game, huh? Most of this Piegan scare is your own concoction. It 'ud make you a big pumpkin in her eyes, wouldn't it, to save us from a pack of Ind'uns? So you came an' lay the danger on thick. If you can't set her away from her dad any other way—"

Wolfe drew back his fist. In all his life he had never been so grossly insulted. He was called a liar and a dastard by the man whose earthly possessions and very life he was risking his own life to save. Hot anger boiled up in him at the rank ingratitude of the squatter.

But, because his years of police service had taught him to sink in his own personality and taught him infinite patience in handling men, he swallowed the insult. Slowly his fist came down.

Into his head flashed the thought of taking Eleanor, riding away, leaving Seth Gunnis there to pay the price of his malignant cussedness. In another flash he realized that that was impossible; it would be a stain upon him all his life.

Gunnis had seen the clenched fist withdrawn; he thought it was cowardice. The charge was not denied; that was proof it had struck home. He pointed to the northeast trail.

"Git! A fellow that'll turn yellow whenever a Piegan yaps, or a fellow that'll try a game like you tried on me, I don't want him snoopin' around my girl. That's warnin' for you. Git an' stay clear!"

Without a word of answer Wolfe swung into the sad-

dle. Before he touched the tired roan gelding with the spur, he looked down a moment.

"A Piegan tomahawk, Seth Gunnis, 'ud let that stubbornness out of your head," he said quietly. "But for Eleanor's sake and the sake of families out on the plains, I'm hoping you don't pay the price of your cussedness tonight."

In a hill pass six miles southwest of the Gunnis ranch, Pretty Duck and a close-riding knot of twenty warriors trotted around a rock jut into an open plot of moonlight.

Their grass-fed *shaganappi* ponies showed the effects of hard riding. The Piegans wore a war paint of black and vermilion, a war headdress; for clothes only the weapon belt and G-string. All of them carried iron tomahawks, long knives in a sheath of rattlesnake skin, and large-bore, single-shot buffalo guns. The whole party moved along as silently as a mottle of shadows.

From the dark depths of a clump of trembling aspen a lone horseman suddenly appeared 30 steps ahead of them. His big roan gelding trotted into the moonlit plot. His Snider carbine was in its saddle bucket and his hands were stretched in front of him, palms out, for a dozen rifles covered his approach.

At sight of his uniform a guttural word passed that he was a *Shaga Laska chee-mog-in-ish* (red-coated policeman). Several of the bucks knew him as Corporal Wolfe. The rifles came down reluctantly.

Pretty Duck rode a few steps in front of his men and greeted the *chee-mog-in-ish* with a terse "Huh!" He was a warrior of 35, one-eyed, squatty, and most terrifically ugly. Wolfe knew him well, rather liked him as an Indian, and always had thought him sensible and fair-minded.

But when he looked past the sub-chief at the younger warriors, at their forbidding faces, and felt out their temper, he thought of that sinister Cree word *eeyumoon*—when plenty blood runs.

For the last two years Wolfe had been expecting just

what had come to pass that night. Four separate times he himself had stepped between Gunnis and Blackfeet with whom he had picked a quarrel.

Several of the foothill bands were the squatter's bitter enemies. The guilt would therefore be impossible to place. Pretty Duck's band knew they could swoop in the night, wipe out the insult, vanish across the Medicine Line to the badlands and hunt buffalo till the crime grew old.

Worse still, when the young bucks got a taste of white blood and their tomahawk lust was aroused, they might ride east and wipe out the emigrant party. They were cunning; they knew that one such massacre would turn squatters away from their hunting grounds for ten years to come.

Wolfe knew that he dared not let them suspect he knew their plans. There in that lonely pass it would be his death warrant, pure and simple. But how under the velvety heavens could he argue with them to go back, and yet appear not to know their plans? Between vengeful Piegan pride and squatter cussedness, with his hands tied by Gunnis's bullheadedness, his life was in danger if he made a misstep in the palavering.

Calmly filling his pipe with fine-cut, he held a match to it till the bowl was aglow; then he passed it to the sub-chief. The palaver was on.

"It is surprising," Wolfe remarked, "to meet Pretty Duck and his warriors above the Medicine Line. They must be going to hunt the buffalo in the plains east of Birch Hills."

"The *chee-mog-in-ish* guesses truth," Pretty Duck was quick to agree. "They are going to hunt the buffalo."

"Good. This meeting is under a lucky moon. It saves me many a long saddle mile. I was on my way to Pretty Duck's spring camp."

Apparently by innocent prancing, the roan gelding maneuvered until the sub-chief was looking over Wolfe's shoulder at the moon so that Wolfe could read whatever expression flitted across his face.

A flicker of surprise flashed across it now at the news

that the corporal had been on his way to see him. By an effort Wolfe kept his voice level and calm.

"I wanted to hold council with him about this white man Gunnis," he plunged. "I have heard of the *siam-siams* killing cattle and the squatter blaming it upon Pretty Duck's men. I have heard of five young warriors who went to have talk with him."

The sub-chief started; his face seemed to freeze. Looking into the eyes not 20 inches from his own, Wolfe realized that he had indeed been wise in appearing to believe the Piegans on a buffalo hunt. And when he saw the *eeyumoon* blaze up among the young bucks his hope of turning back the war party went sliding down to zero. But doggedly he went on. His hands might be tied, but he had to do his best. A fearful responsibility rested solely on his shoulders.

"Pretty Duck has a good heart. He has not dug up the hatchet against the squatter. Any other sub-chief would have been angry as a *siam-siam* stung by a slug of lead. But Pretty Duck is worthy to be a chief of a thousand lodges; he is not angered by little things. The *chee-mog-in-ish* will not forget. When the Blackfeet and Assiniboines do injury to his band because it is small, the *chee-mog-in-ish* will step in and see justice done."

Flattery and promise alike fell flat as a bodewash chip. "Any other sub-chief," Wolfe continued, "would have tried to take justice into his own hands. He would have thought that he could swoop in the night, avenge the wrong and escape, leaving no more tracks than the tamarack owl. But the *chee-mog-in-ish* patrols would find him out—when have they failed?—and if he had sneaked into the badlands south of the Medicine Line the *chee-mog-in-ish* would ask their brothers, the horse-soldiers of the *Mela Haska* nation, to find the sub-chief and hand him across the Line. That would be certain as the rising sun. Pretty Duck knows it; he is wise; he restrains his men."

It was praise with a veiled threat behind it; shrewd

words, but utterly useless. Wolfe paused a moment. He saw that praise, threats, entreaties—all arguments and pleading—were powerless against Piegan pride and anger.

Deliberately he played his last card. "I have said that Pretty Duck is patient and peaceful. But a wrong has been done, and amends must be made. I have come to make them—I myself."

"Huh!" the sub-chief snorted, breaking his stony silence. "How?"

"Is it not according to the tribal laws of the Piegans that one blood relative can atone for another? If Pretty Duck's younger brother should insult a Sioux and call him pony-stealer, could not Pretty Duck go to the Sioux and make atonement?"

The sub-chief walked into the trap. He nodded.

"So it!" Wolfe said quickly. "Not as *chee-mog-in-ish* but as man to man, I can atone for Gunnis. I am blood relative. His daughter is my promised *squaw-siche!* Here!"

He flung his bridle reins to the Piegan and folded his arms, in token that he surrendered himself into Pretty Duck's power.

With a burst-of fiery "No's!" the young bucks crowded up, brandishing their rifles, gesticulating, crying that the *chee-mog-in-ish* should not be allowed to atone. Wolfe sat quietly, watching the sub-chief's face. Like most of the sub-chiefs, Pretty Duck had no iron-handed authority over his warriors, but his decision would have great weight. For all the expression on Pretty Duck's face, Wolfe might as well have been looking at a stone.

A full minute the Piegan stared at him, heedless of what his band was yelling. Under the intensity of his struggle, his features quivered; his thin lips straightened to a hard line. Then suddenly, dramatically, he struck Wolfe an open-handed blow across the mouth—and flung the bridle reins back to him.

"Go!" he said. "You have taken back the lies that were spoken and the blow that was given!"

With his heart considerably higher in his neck than it

should be, Wolfe urged Bang through the circle of Indian ponies and spurred him to a gallop, heading northeast as if back to the Mounted post.

He knew perfectly well that a storm was breaking out behind him. Pretty Duck's promise had been given in solemn faith, but could he hold his young hot-bloods to it?

For half a mile, till he was out of earshot, Wolfe pushed Bang at a noisy canter. Then he turned aside out of the hard-packed trail, swung into a spruce belt where the soft needle-floor padded hoofbeats, and silently rode back toward the plot of moonlight. Four hundred yards away he made the roan gelding lie down like a great faithful dog.

Taking off his spurs and squeaky bandolier belt, he slipped through the buckrush toward the moonlit plot. Cautiously the last 50 feet, he bellied into the shadows of the trembling aspens and lay peering through a screen of boughs, watching, listening.

As he expected, the Piegans were deadlocked in a fierce debate, squatting around the circle of moonlight like a pack of wolves with a leader howling in the center.

Quickly Wolfe saw what was what.

Pretty Duck was just finishing a passionate oration. When he sat down, part of the band cried "How!" in approval; another part snarled their dissent. His younger brother sprang up and strode to the center of the circle.

Dog-Licked-Him-in-the-Face, or Dog-Lick as the *cheemog-in-ish* called him, was bad. Big and powerful like many of the Piegan warriors, his black hair reached up on his forehead like a horse's foretop, he was haughty, vengeful, bloody-minded.

The suspicion of several unprovoked crimes—but no proof—lay at the flap-door of his painted buffalo-skin teepee. His two wives were the widows of two warriors he had killed. The acquisition of many squaws, scalps, and stolen ponies was his highest ambition. Like the rest of the young Piegan bucks who had just danced the sun dance and had not tasted real savage warfare with the

Crees and Assiniboinés, he was a firebrand, eager for war, rapine, massacres.

As Wolfe lay listening, the exhortations of Dog-Lick made his ears tingle. When the Indian spoke of the squatter's young *squaw-siche*, Eleanor, Wolfe would have shot him down in his tracks if he had had his carbine.

Dog-Lick sat down. Another buck rose and spoke. Back and forth across the circle the debate flashed and tossed. The hour climbed to midnight.

Just when Wolfe was beginning to hope and expect that the council would last till the gray dawn, it exploded abruptly in a blaze of fireworks.

Stiff and sore, he wriggled back out of the cover, stepped back to the roan gelding, walked Bang a few hundred paces, and then broke at a full gallop through the silvery moonlight for the Gunnis ranch.

It was one o'clock, the dead of night, the hour when the earth stirs sleepily a moment and settles to rest till dawn. The moon had slid down the western sky and stood only a few inches above the mountain horizon westward. The sky was full of brilliant shooting stars, and a gentle foothill breeze stirred fitfully up the valley.

Far away west a timber wolf was howling. The *better-go-rounds*, the shrill *knee-deeps*, were piping their spring song down in the river. Somewhere about the barn a porcupine was gnawing a rattly board.

On top of the hay-shed Wolfe lay half-buried, watching barn, corral and cabin like a sharp-eyed owl, alert to every shadow and every noise. In his position, ten feet above the ground, he could catch all the peaceful sounds of the homestead and the sound of any suspicious thing abroad.

Sixty yards away was the Gunnis cabin, darkened, outlined in black silver by the moonlight; its occupants asleep and all unaware of danger and guardian outside.

For the first time in many hours, as the slow minutes dragged along and nothing happened, Wolfe had time to look back over the swift work of that day. His atonement

to Pretty Duck meant nothing to him; he laughed silently about it. But in spite of his effort to forget, the bitter scene with Seth Gunnis rankled. He wondered why he should be literally offering his own life to save the man who had shown him ingratitude and bullheadedness and slung insult in his teeth, right there in that very spot, beside the hay-shed.

He was not doing it for Eleanor's sake; he could yet take her and escape.

Again and again, as he thought of the black uncertainty of the coming year, he was tempted to get her and ride off. He could see the window of the room where she slept. The sash was half raised. From outside he could touch her pillow, awake her with a whisper, and take her away. But—

The moon at last dipped behind the western mountains. A black mantle fell over the river valley. He knew his waiting was ended with this setting of the moon.

Down the valley 500 yards an "alarm bird" uttered its weird long cry. From the cottonwoods above the homestead another bird answered, as the female hawk owl should.

Wolfe had heard the bird a thousand times; he knew the subtlest inflection of the real call. These two were perfect—save for one thing. The alarm bird utters his cry in rapid flight, covering 100 yards at least; these calls were given all in one place.

"Scouted all around to see if everything's quiet," he commented. "Those calls meant everybody's asleep. They might get a little surprise."

For another mortal half-hour he heard not one suspicious sound. His eyes ached from peering into the pall of darkness. The terrific strain of his unseen enemies creeping up was making his nerves jumpy.

Then just beneath him at the foot of the hay-shed, he heard a faint rustling, no louder than a blue-racer snake hunting after mice. Craning his neck forward, he could faintly make out a human figure directly under him.

Breath bated, he listened. No other Piegan appeared.

As he was swiftly debating what to do, the Indian beneath him suddenly struck a spark from flint and steel. The spark caught in the *slowi* tinder and sprang to a tiny flame. Cupping it in his hands as a shield against the breeze, the Indian pushed it forward to set the hay-shed on fire.

By its tiny glare Wolfe recognized the Piegan as one of the hot-bloods who had counseled fire and tomahawk in the moonlit pass. And before the *slowi* burned brightly he realized why they were setting fire to the hay-shed.

That was only the first act of their bloody savagery. The crackle of flames would bring the squatter to his door, where he could be shot down by others lurking near the cabin—shot down without danger to themselves. Then by light of the leaping flames they could burn and destroy the rest of the homestead.

Skulking cowards, afraid to go about their revenge boldly, man to man, face to face, in God's daylight! So far Seth Gunnis had been right about them. Only, in his bullheadedness he had failed to see that a coward is more dangerous, more treacherous than a man of courage.

As the Piegan leaned forward to apply the flame, Wolfe drew his legs up under him, grasped his heavy Enfield revolver by the barrel and dropped like a catamount from a goat ledge. The Piegan did not yell alarm, did not even grunt. The dull thud of a single blow—and Wolfe was binding and gagging his enemy.

"Number one!" he breathed hard. "Unless I listened wrong at the council, there's four more of the devils laying low somewhere near here. I wonder—wonder—can I beat 'em at their own game of sneak-low?"

Wolfe had been up a stump as to what he would do when things started popping. He did not know from which direction the Piegans would strike, what trick they would try. But now, as he knelt over the unconscious form of his first enemy, a daring idea shot into his head.

He shrank from bloodshed, though he could shoot straight and quick enough when he had to. His idea was a bloodless plan of bagging all five of the Piegiens single-handed.

Deftly he searched the Indian, lifted his iron tomahawk and eight-inch "frog-sticker," stripped off his belt and appropriated four long *babische* thongs which he found.

After the Piegan had come back to consciousness, Wolfe bent down till he looked into the sparkling black eyes three inches away. His voice was a jabbing whisper as he prodded the Indian with the point of the frog-sticker.

"How many you bucks? Five?"

The Indian nodded.

"I thought. Bellied up to council talk; heard you five swear to come. Now you make long ears to listen. I take off gag. You give signal one buck come help you. I put gag on again. Wait with knife against heart-rib. Signal false, you die *snick! Kumtux?*"

The Piegan plainly understood; Wolfe could feel him quivering under his knee. When the gag was slipped up, he signaled, the low chortling ground-note which the poor-will gives at the end of his *puir-whee-er* call.

Out of the blackness up toward the cabin an answer whipped back instantly. Wolfe slipped the gag in place again, rolled the Indian under the loose hay, and waited with his ear to the ground.

In a minute he heard a slight scraping sound, then a sibilant hiss not ten feet away. Hugging the ground, a wad of hay pushed up in front of him, his Enfield drawn back for a smashing blow, he answered the hiss.

In another moment a head reared up in front of him. He caught the sparkle of two eyes. A blow cracked home squarely between them. The head dropped limply, grotesquely, between the outstretched arms.

"Two!" Wolfe uttered under his breath. "Hit him harder than I meant to. No use tying him up. He'll sleep till the rest of these doings is over—if he ever wakes this side of the happy hunting grounds."

Noiselessly he slid the second Piegan under the hay. His hopes were beating high. Two of the five Indians were his meat already. Could he get the other three by the same ruse?

For a second time he slipped up the bandanna gag and bade the Indian signal. For a second time he laid ear to the ground, answered the hiss in the pitch blackness, saw a befeathered head rise in front of him, drove the butt of the Enfield at a sparkle of eyes.

The blow this time glanced. Groggy and dazed, the Piegan started to leap up. Wolfe throttled him bare-handed, gagged him with a wad of hay and the first Piegan's belt, and hogtied him with the *babische* thongs.

The scuffle made some noise, slight noise, but perhaps enough to carry to the lynx ears up near the cabin. Wolfe waited five minutes, heard nothing. He removed the gag from the first Piegan and bade him signal a third time.

This time there was no answer.

He was riding his luck too hard and knew it. It was too much to hope for, this capturing five without bloodshed. As the minutes dragged along and he heard nothing, an uneasiness grew upon him.

Dog-Lick and the other warrior were somewhere near him; he could feel it in his bones. Their suspicions were aroused; they probably were creeping up to see what had happened to their three companions. It meant a mortal fight there in the darkness; there was no escaping that.

Silently he rose on one knee, pressing his body back against the hay so that the Piegans could not fall upon him as he lay prone. His Enfield rested on his knee; his hand clutched the butt now and his finger quivered on the trigger. The end was taking its own time coming, but he knew it would burst upon him like a flash.

If he could locate them first and get in a shot, he would stand a chance against the odds of darkness and two to one.

To his left along the bottom of the hay-shed, his quick ear caught the familiar snake-like rustle. A moment later

an Indian rose to a crouch, not eight feet away, to peer around him in the blackness.

His head was silhouetted against a dense-packed constellation low in the western sky. Wolfe recognized the slant forehead, the war headdress, the black "oath feather" of Dog-Licked-Him-in-the-Face. The constellation framing his head and, glinting through the feathers, was like a halo of evil.

In his taut attention to Dog-Lick, Wolfe did not hear a rustle along the hay-shed to his right. He turned his body toward Dog-Lick. His Enfield came up. He could see the silver bead at the end of the barrel; he centered it on the slant forehead.

But he could not bring himself to crook trigger-finger. It was shooting an enemy unawares. Too much like an ambushade. He shrank back from it in spite of the urge of common sense. Twice he raised the Enfield, swearing at himself for being loath to shed blood.

In the thin nick of time his ears caught the warning rustle behind him. He turned his body quickly; lest he be stabbed from behind. His movement made a noise, betraying his position.

With a whoop the Piegan behind him sprang. Wolfe could not get the Enfield up in time. He barely writhed to one side, caught the Piegan's knife-arm, and turned the death blow aside. At his wrench the frog-sticker dropped. The Piegan, a powerful buck muscled like a bear, locked with him in a wrestle.

They swayed a second, toppled, fell. Wolfe, on top, tore his arm free from the Indian's grapple and laid the barrel of the Enfield solidly along his temple, a smashing, wicked blow. The Piegan wilted without a grunt.

Wolfe turned and half uprose, whirled the Enfield around as he turned. Over him loomed a figure. Starlight glittered on iron tomahawk as it swung and descended in a murderous arch. Thin lips split in a Piegan scalping yell.

In that tithe of a second Wolfe could not dodge, could not rise, could not escape the blow. As he swung the re-

volver around, his trigger-finger crooked—once—twice—four times—almost like one single shot. A rope of fire leaped upward at Dog-Lick. But Wolfe himself did not hear the explosive barking of his gun.

The descending tomahawk caught him a crashing blow. For a second of mortal agony he fought against the numbing darkness. Then he pitched forward on his face.

The rosy flush of an April dawn was breaking across the prairie, gilding the limber-pines that crowned the foothills. Outside the cabin window a solitaire was singing to split his throat, while his workaday mate flew back and forth from hay-shed to tree carrying bits of hay. He even hopped upon the window sill, cocking an eye at the figure under the white blankets and at the girl sitting beside the bed.

The figure stirred uneasily, as if awakening; and he flew off.

"Arnold!"

Wolfe tried to turn his head to her, but he could not. His eyes had the wide, uncomprehending stare of one who has not yet realized the where and how of his awakening.

"It's all right, darling; I've made you go back to sleep twice, but you can stay awake this time." She slipped an arm under his head.

He realized finally that he was in the Gunnis cabin, tucked in bed, in Eleanor's bed, with her sitting beside him. His hand went up to his head. At touch of the big bandage, memory began flooding back upon him, memory and a host of questions. She read them in his mind.

"We heard your shots and the Piegons yelling; dad and I got rifles and went out. We found you, with Dog-Lick dead across your body. We thought you—we worked for several minutes, darling, before we knew you were still alive."

"What happened with the other four?" he asked quickly.

"They were there. Two needed doctoring. We did all we could for them. They left just before daybreak and took the—body—along with them."

He managed to look at her. "You're worried about them retaliating, girl. There's no need to be. Pretty Duck washed his hands of his brother; I heard that last night with my own ears. Besides, Dog-Lick got killed in a man-to-man fight. And another besides, there's going to be eleven white men's rifles in this limber-pine country tomorrow this time. I knew yesterday and last night that if I could only fight the Piegans off and save you dad's homestead till the other white families got here, we would never have to be afraid of Indians again."

He looked out through the window to a corner of the corral. Gunnis was curry-combing Bang, patting him, feeding him oats like an honored guest.

"What did he say, Eleanor?"

"When we went out, saw you and thought at first you were dead, and he remembered how he'd insulted you, said you were lying, ordered you off the place—he was crushed, Arnold. It was a splendid, manly thing, to throw your life between us and death, after all he said and did."

Splendid, manly thing—Wolfe flushed under his sunburn. In his mind ran the proud thought that to her he had proved himself worthy. That because of his act he would have her precious esteem through all the rest of their life together.

She smoothed his pillow. A dozen trip-hammers were pounding away inside his head, but it would have taken more than that to keep him from feeling happy.

"Pretty Duck's a pretty decent egg, anyway," he commented, in a minute. "About as I expected, his young bucks wanted to go and wipe out these emigrants after they finished here. Wanted to make a thorough job of it. Pretty Duck held 'em in—except these five. I don't altogether blame him for getting on the prod at your dad, Eleanor. But I squared accounts. Told him you are my *squaw-siche*.

"Now, your dad is going to square accounts with me. You say he's sorry. Good. It shows some of his cussedness can be trained out of him. I've had a scheme all cooked up for a week. Listen here, Eleanor—"

He needn't have whispered, save that it made her bend closer to him. She caught a sharp breath as he finished.

"Is she really that—that bad, Arnold? How do you know my dad and she will fall—"

"Out here in this country, it's as good as done right now. I've already invited her to come and stay here, and your dad'll get busy when he hears my ultimatum. The first of June I get my release and two years' back pay I've been saving to give you and me a flying start. The second of June we—"

Eleanor's eyes opened widely in dismay; she laid her hand on his; her lips parted to interrupt him. But he stopped her, pointed outside the window.

"No, it isn't too soon, girl. Those blinking solitaires out there, carrying straws from the hay-shed—they'll have a whole month's jump on us at that!"

Sons of the Forest Edge

By Ernest Haycox

TOM CRUZE was in the cabin-clearing chopping out fence rails when the warning reached him through the drizzling November rain. He dropped the bit of his ax upon the cedar log and stared around the stump-littered field; there was nothing to be seen or heard that justified the vague, indefinite suspense in him. Yet in response to it—for he never disobeyed these instinctive danger signals—he swept the tangle of underbrush that choked the tree trunks of the encircling forest with a half-narrowed eye. Still there was nothing.

The northeast wind fell into the open space and slatted through the fir boughs, picked up earth mold and flung it against the rough cabin walls, twisted the chimney smoke into a crazy spiral; not far away in the trees a swollen creek slithered and dashed between its rocky banks. A dead tree fell afar, rumbling. Signs and portents of the hard Oregon winter to come; but of other dangers no definite witness until Cruze saw his buckskin pony under the barn lean-to jerk suddenly against the rawhide tether. At that the pioneer wasted no movements. He dropped the ax and in a single scooping gesture seized his rifle sheltered beneath a cedar shake; keeping his eyes upon that forest rim he began a slow retreat toward the cabin.

The pony trumpeted and worried at the tether. Out of the brush popped an Indian buck, closely followed by a file of six, keeping a quick pace, heads bowed and bodies swaying with a cradle-like rhythm as they advanced. Seven of them Tom Cruze counted; he halted his retreat and brought up the muzzle of the rifle. The file swayed toward him; the black, plaited polls of hair glistened with the rain. Then of a sudden the file leader stopped at a dis-

tance of ten yards and raised a hand, palm outward. For the first time his head came up and he stared squarely at the white man's face.

"Peace," he said in the clicking, guttural Chinook jargon.

Cruze returned the impassive stare. Like all settlers in the Oregon country, he understood the jargon; it was the universal tongue between white and red man west of the Cascades and north of the Rogue nation, each tribe flavoring the language with its own idiom. In the present instance the Indians were of the Molalla tribe, possessors of the foothills and mountain fastnesses of the Cascade range. Unlike the valley and river tribes, they were farther from the influence of white missionary and trader and hence kept their original character more nearly intact. The missionary Indian shrunk and died; the Molallas were plump, belligerent with all the old tribal fire.

"It is time to speak plain words," said the spokesman after a long deliberate pause. "We have watched the white man come into the valley below us. The tribes there starve and die. The game goes away, and comes no more. The white man's sharp stick turns over the ground and makes bad things. The Indian is sick with many white sicknesses. They were not here before the white man came. All these things we have heard. This is our land. The sun and stars have looked on Molalla people for many moons. My father was happy here and his father before him. If the white man comes the Indian will starve and die of white sicknesses. Molallas will not be like Calapooiahs and Multnomahs who now are falling like autumn leaves. White man, you must go. Go back to the valley where other white men are. Leave the forest and hills to the Molalla."

A silence fell over the group. Cruze gripped his rifle and stared at the solemn group. Leave all this labor behind and retreat? It was not in his blood to do that. True enough, there was land in the valley below him. The fertile Wallamet soil would grow double the crop that this fern-ridden bench land might produce. But the incoming

settlers were taking the best of the valley claims and prices were beyond the reach of a poor man. Besides—and all the sacrifice and toil of one breed of pioneer might be summed up in this reason—he was a forest man.

Others might love the open prairies and seek the river bottom; Cruze had the vision of the cathedral firs forever before him, and the sound of the creeks dashing downhill, and the cold air sliding down from the snow-capped peaks beyond. In the wilderness was game to sustain him, solitude and elbow room to content him. He was master of his domain. Like others he had traveled two thousand miles to find his heart's desire, one of a vast human stream bent on finding the rainbow's end. He had found it. Now must he leave?

The rain whipped around the group, but they might have been statues for all the visible movement. Indian etiquette, this, which commanded silence for mature thought. Cruze heard the cabin door opened and turned. On the threshold stood his wife, tall and young, stamped with the same restless, invincible Western breeding. A cameo-clear face surmounted by heavy golden hair, set with sober eyes.

"Tom, you be carefull! If there's trouble I'll use this pistol."

He broke the silence with a soft, velvet voice. "You shet the door, Amy, or you'll fotch a cold," he called to her. "Thar'll be no trouble."

Then, when she had disappeared, he turned toward his grave audience and dropped into the barbaric jargon. "It is bad medicine for the white man to run. I came in peace. I spoke always to my friend, the Molalla, with a single tongue. My heart is good. Why should I go?"

The leader's heavy face was illumined with an unexpected show of feeling. "It is the white man's way. One comes with a sharp stick to stir the ground. Then two come. Then ten come and the red man must go. The Molalla is no fool. It will be the same with him unless he stop the stream when it is young."

"I speak with a single tongue," reiterated Cruze, the

line of his long chin growing sharper. "My heart is here. The big father at Washington says this land is for all. I stay."

"The big father's eyes are too weak to see the Molalla. Have care, white man, of the Indian's patience. I watched you come here with two horses, a white-faced squaw and a dog. See what you have done with the forest! You cut trees with your ax and stir the ground. Bad medicine! The Molalla is no fool. Take your squaw, your dog and your horse and leave."

"I reckon I'll have to stay," repeated Cruze.

The spokesman of the Molallas drew himself up, and anger sparkled in his dark clouded eyes. "You are a fool, white man!" he warned. "Take your things and go! The Molalla speaks no more until the sun is gone. Then he speaks with the arrow."

Cruze shook his head slowly. "I come with peace in my hand. I kill no game for sport. It is not bad medicine to stir the ground."

"I have spoken!" The leader raised his hand to the sky. "When Molalla comes again it will be with arrows."

They turned silently in the file and trudged away, heads bowed as before, while the jet hair glistened with rain. There was a sibilant rustle of the leaves at the clearing's edge; then they were gone and nothing marked their passage save the horse's uneasy watchfulness.

Cruze sighed, his eyes clinging to the bushes, and his calloused hand slid up and down the stock of the gun. "Thar's trouble afoot," he murmured. "Trouble aplenty fer those who ain't lookin' fer it."

"Tom, come in the house!"

He came at his wife's beckoning and barred the door against the storm. From without, this cabin looked like any other, rough-surfaced and chinked with mud; within, Amy Cruze had worked a transformation on the rough appearances. A white spread was smoothly drawn over the rustic bed; above the wide-mouthed fireplace hung pots and pans in a neat, shining row; the improvised chairs were backed with tanned deer-hide to ease the

rough frames. Such softening as could be done to the rawboned atmosphere of the cabin had been done; the puncheoned floor had a rag carpet; the hewn table was covered over with a cloth of scarlet interwoven with white patterns; the tallow candles beamed from the center. It was only mid-afternoon yet the day was dark and the oilskin windows were inadequate things at best.

"Tom, what is it?" she asked. "Indians don't come out of sociableness."

He set to work wiping the gun. "Why now, ain't nothin' to worry about much," he declared, looking down at his weapon. "They're a little upset about white folks comin' in."

"And they told you to leave?" She was not to be put off. "I knew it would fall! Remember what Dan Mumpower said last month when he came through? Said there'd be trouble soon enough."

"It ain't him." Cruze smacked the table with his fist. "It's Cockstock's doin's. Cockstock allus was a renegade. Even little Chief John ain't powerful struck with him." He stared at the blazing fire. A wrinkle of doubt crept along his cheek. "But he's an eloquent varmint, sartain. He'll turn the Injuns crazy with talk—and then we suffer."

"What did you tell him?"

"Well, why now, what could I tell? Think I'll give up arter all we've done? I said I'd stay."

They were not demonstrative folk; the deeds they did stood sponsor for their emotions. The metal from which they were made was hard and durable, capable of tremendous strength; hard to heat, but glowing hot when once fanned and slow to cool. Perhaps in younger days they had more display of love and affection; since then the seasons had tempered them until they were fit protagonists of the frontier. Tempered so that Tom Cruze might say, "Sartain, I'll stay. They'll not skeer me off." And so that his wife might quietly move to the simmering pot on the crane and nod.

"If it's to be a fight, Tom, you'd better lock the horses in and bring up water and wood," she advised.

"Twon't be fer long. 'Tain't Injun nature to conduct a siege. It's the sudden, stealthy way a man's got to watch." Nevertheless he rose at her bidding and went to fill the empty pails at the creek. At the door he had another idea. "Sartain, ef it's to be war, then Mumpower an' Oldring an' Conyers'll all be primed. A few dead Injuns'll put sense in Cockstock."

These were the other settlers whose log cabins stood like outposts along the heavy green forest rim. The nearest was Mumpower, eight miles beyond Rocking River. Cruze totaled up the possible manpower of these four families in case of trouble, as he trudged toward the creek. Considering himself, there would be four men and ten boys. Enough to withstand nearly any kind of attack, if combined; but combination was next to impossible. In these dark woods and this somber ground the battle was both lonely and solitary. He filled the buckets at the brawling stream and went back to the house, whose dim glow of light and chimney sparks seemed the only cheerful sight in all the dismal, twilight day. He lifted the latch, stepped in, and dropped both buckets with a precipitate oath.

"Amy!"

She had gone to the bed and was staring at him with wide, unfrightened eyes. The message of urgency was in them when she raised a hand. "Run and get Mrs. Mumpower, Tom," she commanded. "And hurry. There—there ain't much time."

He dropped down awkwardly and ran a clumsy hand across her hair. "Why—Amy, I didn't reckon—why, cuss me, I'd told the bucks I'd go ef I'd known this was to happen so soon." It left him in a sudden suspense of fear; he fingered the bright yellow hair while the beads of sweat sprang to his rough skin. "Sartain we'll ketch up and leave right off. We'll make the settlement by ten o'clock."

"No." The slow unhurried drawl of that word seemed to quiet his panic. "I can't travel, Tom. You run away now and get Mrs. Mumpower to come. Hurry. I—"

He was up on his feet, staring from corner to corner.

"Amy gal, I can't pull out with you hyar alone," he protested. "Thar's apt to be trouble."

"Never mind. You can't stay now. Run along, Tom. Bring me that pistol and heap up the fire. I'll get up after a bit and bar the door right well."

He gripped his rifle, and at sight of his wife lying so helpless, so unable to use his strength or his willingness, his panic revived. It was two hours to Mumpower's and two hours back. The Molallas had given him until sundown, and beyond this drizzle and murk of rain the sun was approaching the western line. When darkness fell they would come again. Perhaps he might reach the Molalla village and appeal to Little John. Cruze dismissed the idea at once. There would be only squaws at the village; the fighting men were out in the dark woods, waiting for the hour to strike. Certain peril to leave his yellow-haired wife so helpless in that bed; certain peril to remain. The time had come when she could use only the ministrations of her own kind or of a doctor.

"Tom, you look to have seen Old Nick. It isn't so bad—if you'll hurry. They'll not get in, right off. If they come I'll shoot through that window and they'll be mighty slow to rush in. Tain't dry enough to set the house on fire. Don't you grieve, Tom. Run now!"

"Amy, ain't thar anything I can do?"

"No—no! Go 'way! Hurry for Mrs. Mumpower!"

He stared at her with his jaw muscles bulging outward and his hazel-gray eyes half hidden beneath the shady brows; some urgent impulse bent him over. He impressed a fleeting, shamefaced kiss on the woman's forehead and, without looking back, rushed for the door.

"I'll bustle right along," he reassured her and opened the door. Next moment he had slammed it behind him and was out in the storm.

The door faced upon the dim trail to the settlement; on the opposite side of the clearing the upland trail entered. So, in a way, Cruze was sheltered from savage eyes if they were lurking about; the day was momentarily growing grimmer and the storm clouds blacker, more ragged

in design as they scudded eastward to the hills. The creek rattled under the sudden bursts of rain and the trees whined in stress. Cruze stared about him and of a sudden dropped to all fours and crawled quickly to the nearest clump of bushes. If he could avoid being seen leaving the cabin it would for a little time deter the savages from making an outright attack upon the place; the knowledge that but a lone woman was within would surely hasten their aggression.

He gained the shelter of the brush and was inundated with a cascade of water; plunging down a graveled slope he breasted the turbulent creek and waded across. On the far side a thin trace led through the wilderness of fir and hemlock. He set out upon it at a dog trot, the gun balanced in his right hand.

In the clearing there had been a kind of twilight; here a dismal dusk settled. High up, the treetops caught the storm and sent the report down as a distant roar. All the sport and gusty vehemence of the elements filtered through the heavy boughs and became a persistent dripping rain, marked now and then by a shower of small limbs. And, like the signal of distant artillery, the infrequent detonation of a falling tree arrived in successive whorls of vibration.

He broke through the breast-high thicket, keeping his moccasined feet on the sinuous trace. By courtesy only could it be called a path. It was less than that. Indians used it in paralleling the foot of the Cascades; it was the frayed string that linked the widely separated outposts—Cruze, Mumpower, Conyers, Oldring. And beyond them others unknown. It wound in and out of draws, skirted and crossed rivers, entered meadows, taking always the line of least resistance until it finally crossed the range and, several hundred miles south, arrived at a tall butte called Yainax, where each fall the tribes from all the Northwest and California met for trade. And it marked the highest surge of a white tide that had washed Cruze and his remote neighbors toward the mountain fastness.

Never did Cruze break his step until he arrived at the Rocking River. The rifle swung back and forth, his breathing became more and more labored, he ran with a divided mind, half dwelling at the little cabin behind him and half warning his eyes to be on the alert for wilderness prowlers. He had always been on more or less friendly terms with the Molallas; yet, like all pioneers, he had that kind of trust in savage nature which was bolstered by sharp observation. There was a great fear upon him, a fear that speeded his legs and put added vigor in the whipcord body, not of Indians, but for his wife.

So he ran until he broke through the saplings and brush to face the turbid, yellow Rocking River hissing along the top of its banks and carrying the sediment and drift of a summer's collecting. It was not so very wide—ten yards measured it at this particular point, which at normal times was a ford. Now no man could venture over on foot. Cruze remembered a deadfall that spanned the stream a little above, and once more set out at a trot along the turbulent waters; when he had gone two or three hundred yards he saw the middle of the deadfall sagging perilously into the water. It would do him no good to try that route unless he had some kind of purchase to the farther shore. Looking around and above him, he shook his head in a kind of desperate disappointment and, turning, ran back to the ford.

There had been growing on him that vague, uneasy feeling of danger again. No particular sound in the maelstrom of booming river and groaning trees arrived to warn him; it was, as before, the indefinite call to his instinct of self-preservation. He slipped noiselessly back into the fringe of grape and salal bushes, crouched on his knees and stared across at the gloomy thicket. Nothing out of ordinary that he could determine; the wind whipped the leaves and boughs; the rain pattered down. Still he rested, his body taut as an Indian bow, the rifle gripped across his thigh.

"God A'mighty!" he growled, and shifted uneasily. "No time to fool around with every little thing I hear."

He had the stalker's patience. At any other time he would have rested there, immobile, voiceless, until the impalpable warning had dissolved or the quarry came into view. But fear was on his shoulders and urged him to hasten; he gave another long scrutiny to the far bank, strained his ears for the minor notes in the storm's cannonading, and then rose out of the covert.

Below the ford a dozen yards stood an alder whose trunk, undermined by the freshet, canted toward the other shore. The treetop extended three-quarters across the water, and on the far side was met by the out-reaching boughs of a hemlock. Cruze passed another swift glance through the darkening haze and leaped for the tree. He crawled up through the branches to the very top and looked down at the livid current. There was a hiatus of four or five feet across to where the fir boughs stretched their shelter, perhaps ten feet below his present perch. He swung the teetop back and forth, clung to his rifle with a death's grip, leaned far out on the return swing of the alder, shouted "So-ho now!" and leaped through the air.

He made an arc through the dismal sky, cleared the open water gap and fell a-sprawl in the fir boughs. They momentarily broke his fall; then they gave way and he started a crazy, head foremost descent to the ground. The fir needles scratched his face; he sought to check the fall with the free arm and was conscious of a hot slashing pain from shoulder to forearm. The rigidly held gun caught crosswise between two limbs, snapped his body around like a top, turned him end for end, spun him, and catapulted him through the last ring of boughs to the ground in a dizzy heap.

It knocked the breath from him. That tenacious fire of self-protection, however, set him to movement almost automatically. He pulled one foot from the river's edge and weakly crawled toward deeper shelter, dragging the gun along. There he fell against a bush and for a moment relaxed. It was only for a moment. He seemed to hear a high, thin, new-born cry thread its way among all the varying noises of the storm, and he sprang up terrified,

running at full strength toward the trace.

A shadow rose up full against him, shutting off the small light of day. For a third time that ill-starred afternoon, the surge of warning spread through the nerves of his body; this time the proximity made the shock and reaction more intense. He jumped aside and brought up his rifle, pulling the trigger as he advanced. The savage shouted, "Hey!" and swung a war-club. The rifle's hammer ticked forlornly against metal, and the the wet powder refused to ignite.

"You damned varmint!" yelled Cruze. "Git outen my path!"

The war-club banged against the gun's stock and knocked it aside; the savage spread out an encircling arm. Cruze drew off and pulled his hunting-knife. His arm flashed up.

"Hey!" shouted the buck, and fell with a weird cry.

Cruze leaped over the body and fled down the trace. Mumpower's was ahead.

Time, after that encounter, was for Tom Cruze a great leaden weight that dragged at his feet and pressed against his chest. Overhead the storm beat with an increased fury against the treetops and the cannonading of distant wind-falls increased. He ran on, undeterred by the turnings and dipping of the trail, plunging over logs, brought up by vines. Endlessly he ran, with the great fear freezing his heart until, through a long dark vista, he saw a solitary gleam of light and presently heard the baying of dogs, full-throated, menacing.

"Hyeeeeee! Dan! Hyeeeeee!" he shouted at the top of his voice, scrambling over a rail fence.

The comforting spark of warmth dipped and died, leaving the cabin utterly dark. The dogs closed in.

"Who's that? Sing ag'in!" an answering yell came across the clearing.

"Hyeee, Dan. It's Tom Cruze! Call off them thar dogs an' let me in!"

"Down, down, you curs!" a powerful voice sent out warning. "Git down! Belle, come back hyar afore I bust

a rib!"

Cruze ran up. "It's my wife, Dan!" he blurted. "I reckon I'll have to ask yore wife to come right over. And them cursed Molallys give me warning just afore I pulled out."

Mumpower stood in the doorway. He was a short man with a barrel chest and an iron-rust beard that masked his face, but a blaze of anger sparkled in his eyes and he turned a club-like arm into the cabin.

"Hyar, you boys, git up the guns. Maw, it's Miz Cruze needs yore help. Ed, saddle a hoss fer maw. The rest of us'll use shank's mare. Tom, yo're shakin' like a pizen pup. Maw, whar's the coffee pot? Injuns out, eh? Wal, by hell! We'll blast 'em!"

Cruze gulped down the coffee. "They give me to sun-down," he informed between swallows. "'Twasn't but a half-hour later that the missis went to bed. Dan, what time is it now?"

Mumpower pulled out a big silver timepiece and squinted. "It's five-thirty. Sundown wouldn't rightly come ontill about six, ef thar war a sun."

The sweat rolled down Cruze's face.

"Ain't no time to lose," he muttered. "The missis—"

A clap of thunder overbore his last words. Mumpower's five sons tramped in the door, armed and ready. Mrs. Mumpower, silver-haired and plump, was swathed in a blanket. "Laws, Mumpower, git yore hat an' come. We ain't no Methodist party. That poor little girl all alone!"

"Maw, you'd best put suthin' more on. Hit's goin' to be tarnal wet."

"Hush up, Paw Mumpower, and don't stand thar like a bump on a log. Don't you see how Tom Cruze is fumin'!" The good lady went out and got into the saddle. "Wet! Now you'd think I was Queen o' Shelby. Ain't I been wet afore? Shet that door tight."

"Hold," said Mumpower. "I reckon the Rockin' River's plumb overflowin' ain't it, Tom?"

Cruze thought a moment. "Can't take that horse across. But if we had a forty-foot stretch of rope—"

One of the boys called out of the blackness ahead. "I

got it," he called. "Reckoned we'd sort o' hawl Maw acrost."

The dogs bayed and slumped off ahead of the horse. Indian-file the party returned down the trace. Cruze cut around the other men and took the lead. Mumpower was directly behind, with his sons following, one leading the horse.

"How's that deadfall across the creek?" asked Mumpower.

"Sunk in the middle."

The elder pioneer held his tongue for a half mile before he solved the problem. "We'll tie the rope end to Elvy—he swims best—and let him try the log," he decided. "With the rope across we c'n each tow over an' pull the hoss through with Maw on it."

That was the end of talk until the river was reached an hour and a half later. It was seven, and a torrent of water splashed between the trees. The stream tugged and groaned at the banks. Some jam of logs not far above created a cataract that resounded above the lesser noises. Cruze burst through the salal and arrived at the deadfall. It was barely distinguishable, a dark strip extending downward to a stretch of creaming water.

"Give me the rope," said Cruze. "I'll tie it around my ribs and make the jump."

Mumpower rubbed a bald, sopping head and calculated the distance. "She's a good eight or nine feet an' under water in the middle. Ain't sech a shucks of a jump, but the powerful part is to land on the other end o' the log 'thout bogglin,' Elvy's spryest. Let him go."

But a fury of haste possessed Cruze. He was fastening the rawhide line around his waist. "Give me plenty of slack," he said and walked out upon the log.

Mumpower let out the slack and turned the other end around his club-like arm. "Ef you slip I'll haul back!" he shouted.

All creation seemed to stand at a pause and it appeared as if the roaring river and the pounding storm held their voices in abeyance for one significant moment. Out of the

shadowy wilderness ahead, sounding faint but certain, echoed a sudden burst of shots, perhaps a dozen in unison, followed by a ragged volley. Then a complete silence in which Cruze threw up a shaking arm.

"Hark!" cried Mumpower.

One lone echo swiftly bore down on the wind.

"It's Amy firin' back!" cried Cruze. "By God, if we're too late I'll stalk every Molally in these mountains!"

He drew back up the log a piece, ran ahead and leaped at water's edge.

"Hol!" yelled Mumpower by way of assistance and stood ready to pull the line.

Cruze had fallen flat on the farther incline, grasping the bark surface with both hands. The curling water licked at his moccasined feet and the log teetered perilously. In another instant he was up and on the farther shore, tying the rope to a sapling.

The boys went across, one by one, each with the rope's end around his waist and fighting the current as they whirled down and across the turbulent current. Mumpower stood behind and hitched the rope around the horse's neck.

"Now, Maw, you hang tight in this hyar saddle and the hoss'll do the rest," he directed.

"Don't you get skeered for me, Mumpower," replied the woman. "Oh, that poor lamb! Git along, horse."

The animal approached the water and reared back. Mumpower thwacked him on the rump, and next instant the current took animal and rider. For a time Mumpower raised both arms in suspense. The woman clung to reins and pommel, while the horse's head shot down the creek, bobbing above and below the surface, eyes wide with fright. Cruze and the four young Mumpowers pulled at the line, hauling it shoreward.

Cruze threw the line across for Mumpower and presently the elder was with them. "Waugh, cold water ain't my style nohow!" he roared in distaste.

"A leetle extra washin' ain't goin' to hurt you, Mumpower," retorted his wife. "Oh, that poor lamb in the

cabin! Hurry!"

Cruze shouted a tremendous curse and ran into the brush with the others following behind him. Once more a staccato volley of shots resounded in the forest and once more, after a long, hesitant pause, came the single, lonely reply. Cruze was pouring out a steady stream of oaths, fighting aside brush and limbs.

Of a sudden a bright mushroom of light spread through the forest, turned to a yellow blob and leaped pointedly to the sky. Cruze screamed a war whoop. In return the forest in front of him echoed with Molalla cries. The pioneer stopped in his tracks and threw up an arm, dimly seen, to the rest.

"It ain't the house they fired, it's the old lean-to I used fer a barn," he said. "They did it from cover and I reckon they figger it'll catch the house."

"Hyar's fightin' to do," rumbled Mumpower. "Yore wife's safe fer a little while."

"How do you know?" retorted his wife. "The poor lamb, I ought to be there right this minute."

"Maw, you git off that horse and be quiet a second. Boys, you all spread out and sneak for'd. The Injuns'll all be right on the clearin' edge. Whack 'em from behind. Elvy, you stay with yore mother."

The burning lean-to illumined the whole clearing and set the oiled-skin windows to gleaming. The Indians raised a bedlam of noises and the firing became general. Cruze brought up the butt of his rifle and without ceremony dashed forward. Mumpower dropped to the ground. A shot banged out and whistled through the leaves. Cruze's gun descended with a solid thump.

"Thar's one Injun skull caved in," muttered the elder and rose up.

Both pioneers were creeping along the fringe of the trees, watching for the little jets of red that announced gunfire. Dead in front of Mumpower a savage rose and grunted, "Hough!" Before the white man could raise his rifle he was overborne and sent to the earth with the Molalla on top. The little copse seemed to become

instantly the focal point of battle. The bushes rattled and a dozen warriors popped into sight; the reflection of the burning building revealed their dripping, half-naked bodies and made them seem like satanic creatures sprung from the earth. Once more the guttural shout of victory.

Cruze whirled about; the rifle crashed down on another skull; Mumpower shoved his knee in his opponent's stomach and lifted him clear.

"Take that, you cuss!" he muttered and, rolling over, sunk his hunting-knife hilt-deep.

"Comin', Paw, comin'!" Elvy Mumpower's cry rang through the glade.

Three of the boys converged upon the fight. The rifles burst out; the short orange flame thrust weird fingers into the semi-lit place. A great, prolonged cry of death shuddered from one Molalla throat, wavered, and fell away. It seemed to be the turning point of the fight. The rifle shots stopped; the brush rustled under many moving bodies; within the count of ten the place of battle was deserted and silent, leaving only the dead upon the field. Mumpower got to his feet and shook himself like a be-draggled dog. "Cuss me, I felt my top-knot come plumb loose that time." Then he turned upon his youngest son. "Elvy, I told you to stay with yore maw!"

"She's cached in the brush. Told me to come ahead and help out."

"Now, Mumpower, don't you scold him," from the thicket came the woman's reply. "He's got to shoulder a gun sometime or other."

Cruze was running across the clearing. Even before he got to the door it swung open to meet him, and upon the threshold stood the tall, thin, rawboned figure of a man dressed in preacher's black. It was Joab Porter, itinerant preacher and doctor, who made it his duty to visit all the solitary and outlying places in the hills and valley.

"Amy?" Cruze cried out his question.

"Doin' tolerable well," was the slow rejoinder. "Yo're the paw of two more Oregon citizens now, both male, fat and healthy."

Cruze wiped his forehead. "How'd you come to be hyar?" he asked.

"Was heading thisaway when I heard talk o' trouble back at the settlement. Thought if I pushed on in a hurry I might help. I got hyar plumb in time, it appears."

From within came a steady wailing cry. Cruze felt suddenly weak and humble, and Porter must have read his feeling, for he clapped a hand on the pioneer's shoulder.

"God's will," the steady kind voice boomed comfort. "Down on yore knees."

And there in the flickering light of the fireplace, with the wind whipping through the open door and the rain beating relentlessly down upon the roof, the two men knelt silently while the new-born cried. The burning lean-to fell apart with a hissing sound, and in the remote distance a gun banged a departing challenge.



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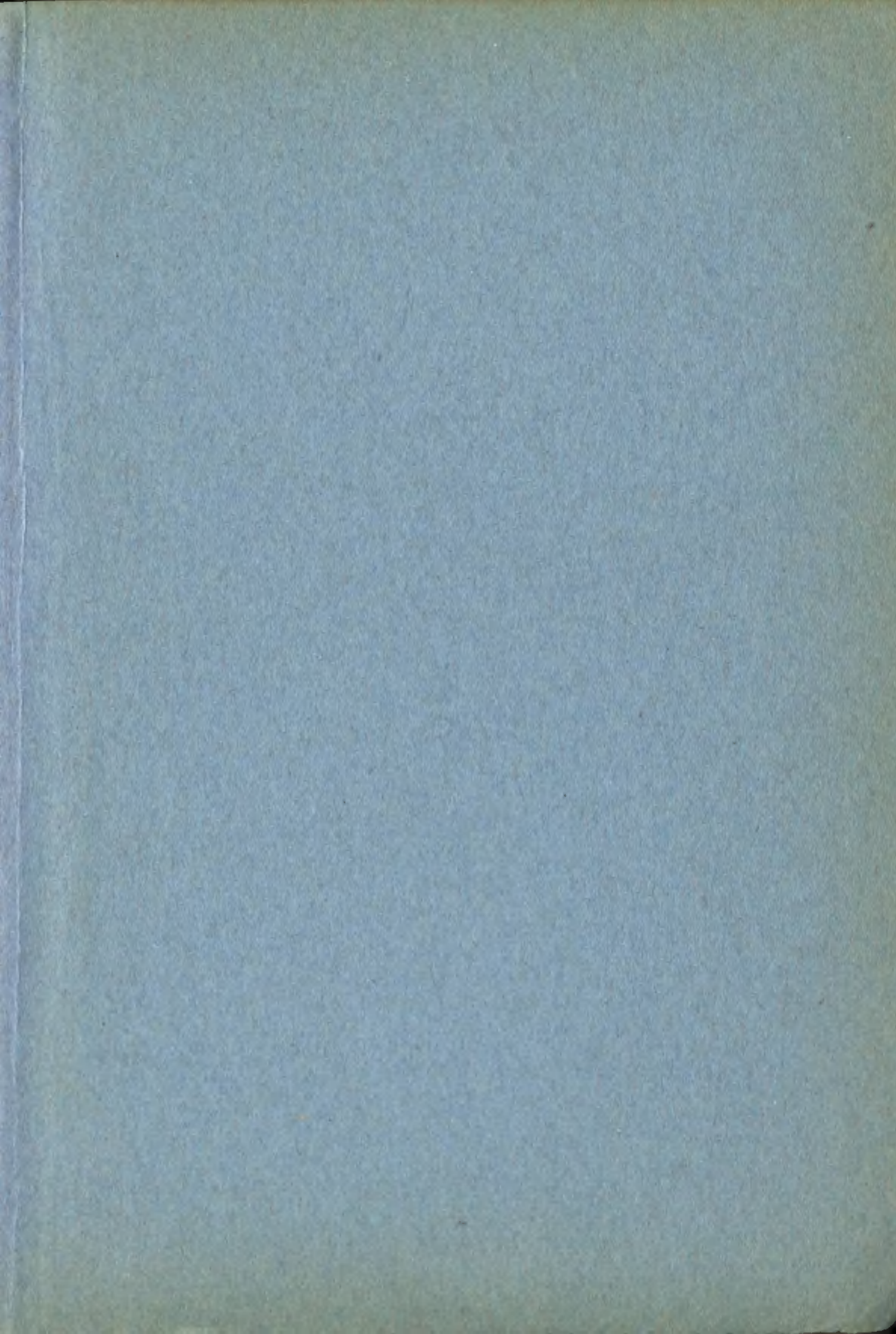
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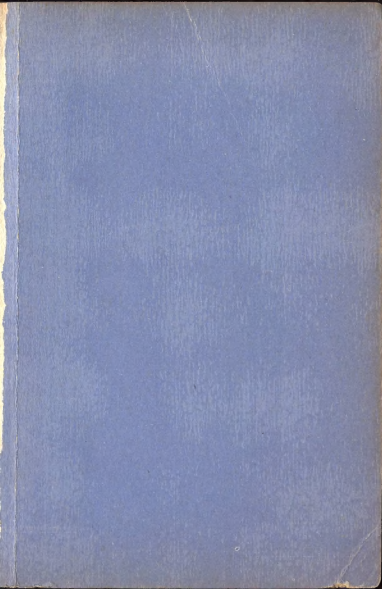


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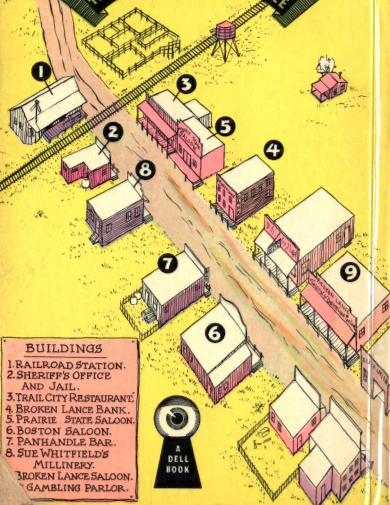
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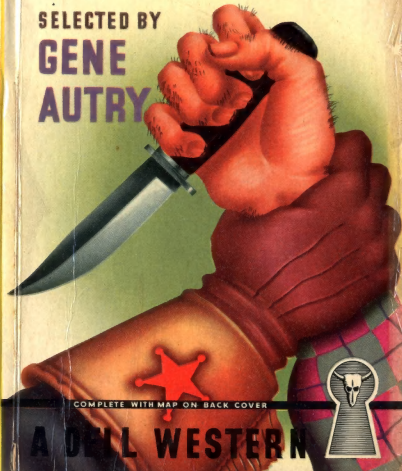
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